Interview with Stephen E. Palmer Jr.

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

STEPHEN E. PALMER, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Today is the 31st of June, 1995, and this is an interview with Stephen Palmer, Jr. It's being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Steve, can we start at the beginning? When and where were you born, and something about your parents?

PALMER: I was born in Superior, Wisconsin; my father was a Presbyterian clergyman, and my mother had been a schoolteacher. That, incidentally, had something to do with my desire to enter the Foreign Service, because he was on the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church for a while and we often had missionaries in our home. So the idea of people working and living abroad was something of which I was aware early in life.

Q: Were the missionaries you would see, were they pretty well China oriented?

PALMER: China and Africa.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

PALMER: By that time we had moved to upstate New York, a small city called Lockport near Buffalo, and I went to high school there. And from there, again with the Foreign Service in mind, to Princeton.

Q: When you say with the Foreign Service in mind, I mean, you had been in high school, were you sort of getting yourself ready?

PALMER: I was told later by a seventh grade teacher that I'd told him that I wanted to be a Foreign Service officer, and I took the standard liberal arts courses.

Q: When you went to Princeton, you started there when?

PALMER: 1941.

Q: 1941, which is sort of an interesting time to start going to Princeton.

PALMER: A few months before Pearl Harbor.

Q: What happened when the war was declared? You were about eighteen?

PALMER: The next week after Pearl Harbor I went to New York and volunteered for the Marine Corps. There happened later to be a Navy and Marine Corps V-12 unit established at Princeton and we were all encouraged to stay in college, and finish as much of it as we could. So I did, and I graduated in three years instead of four. I graduated in '44.

Q: Then what? You went into the Marine Corps?

PALMER: Well, I was in the Marine Corps and during the last year we were in uniform, and marched into classes.

Q: What did the Marine Corps do?

PALMER: I went through basic training, and then finally to Quantico Officer's School. Then we went out to Camp Pendleton where I was trained in special forces work in connection with the landing on beaches, presumably in Japan. And then went to Honolulu in a replacement pool during Okinawa, and I was, to make a long story short, never called up, so I never saw action.

Q: I suppose you belonged to the school of thought that the dropping the atomic bomb on Japan was not a bad idea.

PALMER: In retrospect, yes, although at the time I regretted that I hadn't been tested in action, but I had a good experience the next year before discharge. I was almost a year on the island at Hilo, and among my tasks was that of education officer, and I was able to teach maybe 30 men how to read and write. That was very gratifying.

Q: Yes, it certainly was. Were these sailors, Marines?

PALMER: They were mostly Army, although there were some Marines, and a few airmen who had been drafted late in the war, mostly from Appalachia.

Q: So this set you off on the teaching tangent.

PALMER: Well, it did, because after I was discharged in '46, upon reaching my parent's home in Lockport, New York, I found a couple house guests who were members of the Board of the American School in Tehran, and they were talking about having to close the school because they couldn't recruit enough teachers at the salary they were offering, which was $100 a month. To make a long story short, I volunteered and did that a year.

Q: What were you teaching?

PALMER: I was teaching history and English mostly. I taught English to Norman Schwarzkopf.

Q: Who later became the general commander of the Persian Gulf War against Iraq.

PALMER: Yes, his English turned out to be pretty good.

Q: You'd been talking about the Foreign Service and here was your first look at a country. What was Tehran like in those days?

PALMER: This was before there was any appreciable foreign community, almost no business community in Tehran, and no, for instance, no taxi cabs, except horse-drawn droshkies. It was very primitive but I look back on it very fondly. George Allen and Kitty were very kind to me in terms of inviting me to things at the Residence.

Q: He was the ambassador.

PALMER: Yes, and one of our great. I had my first contact with other agencies there, including a man with whom I've kept in contact ever since.

Q: I'm not sure it was the CIA in those days.

PALMER: Well, whatever it was called.

Q: Did your sojourn in Iran whet your appetite for more foreign service?

PALMER: Oh, yes. I still had that very much in mind, and that was just sort of a little detour. After that I had a full year, including summer, at Columbia and eventually ended up many years later, after I had co-authored a book, which served as my thesis, with an MA, and after that year I came down to Washington and took the Foreign Service exam.

Q: So we're talking about '47-'48, and in '49 you took the exam. When did you come into the Foreign Service?

PALMER: Well, I had to take the Russian language over twice. I had started my Russian at Columbia, and I had three terms, not particularly accelerated and I failed it by a couple of points the first time. The retest was given in fairly short order, and at that time we were told to find other employment because the State Department didn't have any money to hire, it didn't need new officers right then. It was at that juncture that I came to Stewart Hall for a brief time.

Q: We're doing our interview at Arlington Hall, in Arlington.

PALMER: And then I had a short time in CIA itself before my appointment came up. And to answer your question, I started in January of '51.

Q: What was the situation? Did you come into a Foreign Service class at that time?

PALMER: Yes, I think there were about 25 in our class. There hadn't been any classes I guess in almost two years, but of course the classes were very small in those days. In those days the classes were sworn in by the Secretary, so Dean Acheson was the one who ... it was quite an impressive ceremony. I remember his saying to me, after the Director General introduced us—the Director General being Richard Porter Butrick, who is still alive, and who also came from Lockport. And Butrick said, “Mr. Secretary, this is Steve Palmer, he's from Lockport, New York, he's the only other Foreign Service officer ever from Lockport, New York.” And Acheson looked at me, and he looked back at Butrick, and he looked at me, and he looked at Butrick—”I should have thought one might have been enough.” Typical Dean Acheson.

Q: Can you describe a bit about the composition of your class that came in in '51, and a bit about your training?

PALMER: Yes. We had one woman, the rest were all white males. I think only three of us were married at the time. I don't think any of us had more than a Master's degree. It was a bright bunch, and I made several very close friends, one of whom is probably my best

friend to this day. We had quite a lot of camaraderie; there was quite a lot of cohesion in the group.

Q: How long did the training last?

PALMER: It was in that old red brick building on C Street, and I didn't have any language training because I was assigned to Nicosia. It was something like four months, I believe. About all I remember from the instruction was the lady whose husband had been an ambassador, or a minister, somewhere and taught us etiquette, including how to lay a table, which corners of cards to turn—a whole language of which corners of card to turn, which I never did use.

Q: Your first assignment was Nicosia.

PALMER: Yes, there from '51 to '53. It was a very small post, not including the big FBIS station which was only remotely connected with the Consulate. In the Consulate itself there were only three State officers, the third one being an administrative officer. We had one American secretary which meant that I was blessed with having to do the—I've forgotten what the coding thing was.

Q: One-time pad.

PALMER: Yes, a one-time pad and those strip things. That's when I first developed an aversion to useless instructions, or broadcast instructions, which were not pertinent to all posts. That was very interesting, it was a satisfying assignment. I did some political reporting, and economic reporting, as well as consular work. I was sort of our delegate to Archbishop Makarios because he was being handled with kid gloves, given the British aversion to recognition of him as the political leader. I remember how upset my British friends were when I went to the church office of the Archbishop to give him his visa to the United States rather than requiring him to come to our place.

Q: What was your impression of Makarios?

PALMER: I was reminded of him by Castro, though I never knew Castro. Very compelling eyes, very strong grizzly chap. I found him rational in our discussions, and not extreme.

Q: In the first place, what was the situation on Cyprus in this '51 to '53 period?

PALMER: There was no violence as I recall it, and the two communities were all mixed up and getting along okay, and there was quite a bit of intermarriage. I belonged to a club, it was called the Bachelor's Club. You had to be a married man to be a member, the Deputy High Commissioner and a few other top Brits, and Turkish and Greece Cypriot community leaders, lawyers and one thing and another. I was the only American invited to belong, and we had a lot of very congenial times. The man who technically replaced me doing consular work, was from another agency. He was inadvertently assassinated when presumably a Greek Cypriot terrorist threw a grenade through a street window in the basement taverna where he and some British friends were having some drinks. I've forgotten his name, his brother runs an insurance company which caters to the Foreign Service. So it was shortly after we left that violence did start.

Q: Did you ever run across Colonel Grevas?

PALMER: No.

Q: Did the Greeks have army troops on the island at that time?

PALMER: No.

Q: Well, of course, they wouldn't have had, it was strictly British.

PALMER: Right, and they had very few troops. It wasn't viewed as a military situation.

Q: Who was the consul general?

PALMER: His name was Joseph Wagner. He had a very charming wife, Camille. Joe died fairly early in life.

Q: Were you married at this time?

PALMER: Yes, and that was the reason I was assigned to Nicosia. I was originally assigned to Izmir and the lady in personnel who looked over these things, when she found my wife was pregnant said, “Oh, you can't go to Izmir, you've got to go to a more civilized place.” So she thought Cyprus would be nice.

Q: How did you find dealing with the British at that time there?

PALMER: There were in essence two sets of Brits there. One of the old school, including the Governor General who thought they should be and would be there forever. And some of the younger officers thought that a degree of independence perhaps on commonwealth status, or something like that, was the sensible way to go.

Q: Were we pushing anything at that time?

PALMER: Not really, not to my recollection. I think we were sort of way out in left field, or off the radar screen as they say today.

Q: The cold war was just beginning to crank up, we'd just gotten involved in Korea. Was Cyprus considered at that point—had it even gotten into the cold war business as far as we were concerned?

PALMER: No, I think not. I don't recall even semi-strategic consideration being given.

Q: What about Israel? The state of Israel started in '48.

PALMER: Yes, that was interesting because we had a very active Israeli consul. Perhaps the Egyptians put a post there too. Anyway there was a lot of sort of Arab-Israel stuff going

on and that was very interesting to try to follow although it was almost all clandestine. Yes, I remember the Israeli consul whose name was Yaron; very urbane.

Q: You're saying really the Arabs and the Israelis were talking to each other.

PALMER: Well, no, they were jockeying. I think the Israelis even then were using Cyprus as a transit point for various arms and things, and the Arabs were trying to find out about that. It was all sub rosa, which in my job I was not called to pay much attention.

Q: Your job was basically consular work?

PALMER: Consular and then I had the Makarios bit, and a lot of economic and agricultural reporting which was required and most of which was nonsensical.

Q: You'd go out and count grape vines, or something?

PALMER: Well, almost as silly. The only way to submit the annual report on sage production was to go to the open market in two or three cities and count the bags of sage that was picked and brought in by little old women.

Q: As a consular officer, were there many Cypriot Greek Americans?

PALMER: Yes, there was quite a Greek Cypriot community already in the United States and quite a bit of back and forth, relatively small numbers. But that had been going on a long time. We had very able foreign nationals working with us in consular work. I enjoyed the consular work mainly because its all with people.

Q: During this two year period, your initial tour, I take it there weren't any great events. It was a rather tranquil island at that time.

PALMER: Yes, very much so.

Q: Was there any feeling at our Consulate about what if these Turks and Greeks might lay into each other?

PALMER: I must admit we did not foresee how bad it might get.

Q: So you left there in '53, and I have you going to Serbian training.

PALMER: Yes. As noted I'd come in with Russian, and I had wanted to have a post in Moscow. Of course, they never sent anyone to Moscow or Leningrad on their first tour. I was told that the Russian field was kind of overcrowded, which it may have been because there were so few slots, at least in the Soviet Union, and that the coming field was Balkan specialization. I had studied the Balkans quite a lot during my graduate year, and I thought that Yugoslavia, among the Balkan states, would be by far the most interesting. So I volunteered for that, and again back in personnel this lady congratulated me and said it was just remarkable that I'd been able to get this training assignment. She congratulated me profusely. Then I asked how many people had applied, and she said I was the only one. Later it became very popular. But after about six months of Serbian at FSI they sent me to the University of Indiana in Bloomington which had a splendid program in the prospectus, but which program was very deficient on the ground. I think they were plans rather than actuality. However, rather than fritter away a year I continued my language training there, and I found that the library had one of the two sets in the United States, in the original Serbian-Croatian, of the Secret Archives of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Harvard had the other, and I ascertained that no one at Harvard had gone into [them — we're] talking about maybe a 20 volume set, 15 or 20 volumes. So I started to dig into some of those, and I got the idea of doing an extended paper focusing on the Macedonian policy of the Yugoslav Communist Party, how they used the Macedonian problem in the revolution, in the war from which they emerged victorious.

Q: We're talking about the '40-'45 period.

PALMER: Yes, well actually it went back quite a ways, but it was focused on the war years and the immediate post-war years. And that is the paper which years later was accepted — well first of all, years later Peter Krogh, now of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, was assigned to Embassy London on a — I think he had a White House scholarship that year, he was assigned to me in London and we got to know each other pretty well and the subject of this paper came up, and he asked to see it and then he found a graduate student who very ably up-dated the paper and then it was published in 1971. The title is “Yugoslav Communism and the Macedonian Question.” I guess my portion was about the first two-thirds of it. And that was accepted as my Master's thesis at Columbia.

Q: Did you gain any impression about the Yugoslav Communist Party that might have been different from the impression that was generally held about the Russian Communist Party?

PALMER: Well, of course, the main focus of my academic approach was not the break with the Soviet Union, or the Soviet Union's expulsion of the Yugoslav Communist Party from the Comintern, but rather the whole nationality question of Yugoslavs as exemplified by the Macedonia question, and how really brilliantly the communist tacticians manipulated nationalist feelings all over the country in order to gain support for the revolution, and first of all to muster support against the great Serb element as exemplified by Mikhailovic, and, of course, the Fascist and Nazi-supported stooges in Croatia.

Q: As you looked at this problem of the nationalities problem in Yugoslavia today, May of '95 we're talking about terrible problems that the world, and the United States particularly, is facing of what to do about this tribal conflict. Did you get any impression about Yugoslavia from doing this as far as its unity, and its brotherhood unity, and its basic underpinnings.

PALMER: I must admit that I was favorably impressed in general by the Titoist approach to the nationalities question, and the whole idea of recognizing a Macedonian nationality.

It's debatable whether it existed before, but it certainly exists now. The whole idea of Bosnia-Herzegovina without either Croatian or Serbian control, the whole idea of balance in the makeup of the federal power structure, and in the party power structure, I think were positive ideas. Now, it can be said that they didn't work because of what happened subsequently. I would say that nothing else would have worked better.

Q: From your Serbian teachers, did you get any feel for the Serb approach to the Yugoslav problem?

PALMER: I think the teachers here at FSI were reasonably careful about appearing to be overly partisan. A Serbian lady who taught me at Bloomington was a fairly radical Serb nationalist, and I got earfuls from her going back many hundreds of years.

Q: Everything went back to the 1300s and the battle of Kosovo. You went out to Belgrade where you served from '54 to '57. What did you do?

PALMER: I was junior man in the political section, and the first really well trained language and area officer to hit the post. I was put in charge, along with a British colleague, but I was mainly the one in charge, of the Joint Translation Service which was very big in those days. That, of course, helped me not only to improve my reading language at least, but also my appreciation of the nooks and crannies of policy differences, etc. We expanded the coverage from the main daily newspapers and national party periodicals, to cover almost everything that was put out in the country. We were able to get quite a few reasonably significant insights from out of the way journals, provincial newspapers and magazines and party periodicals.

Q: How would this work? I mean, the fine art of trying to understand what a communist country was about rested rather heavily on listening to broadcasts, but particularly to the publications. I like to just get a feel from somebody who was in that.

PALMER: We assumed, I think correctly, that our foreign national staff on whom we depended very heavily, had to report to the secret police, were periodically questioned about what we were interested in, and what they had told us to look for, etc. So I felt very strongly that it was up to me, and to a certain extent my British friend, to do the broader coverage. In other words, something big came out on Borba or Politika.

Q: These were the two major newspapers.

PALMER: Yes. The Yugoslav translators would see them, and they would know that we would see them, and they would translate them, and there wouldn't be any question about covering party congresses, or whatever. But I didn't think they should be counted on to find little bits and pieces, little tidbits, tucked away in some small journal or remote publication. So I did quite a lot of searching myself, and then I would tell them we wanted it translated. I didn't use my spoken Serbo-Croatian very much, almost all the contacts — the ambassador and senior officers in the embassy spoke English or French or German — and it wasn't until I went to Sarajevo that I really began to use the spoken language.

Q: What was the situation in Yugoslavia in the '54 to '57 period?

PALMER: It was going very well bilaterally. We had a vibrant AID mission there, economic assistance was going on apace. Bilateral relations were good. Americans at the embassy were naturally very interested in what the Soviets were up to there, and they were interested in what we were up to, and also the Chinese who came in there with a huge mission, relatively huge. They were very interested in tracking each other. It was a center for international espionage. I did a lot of field trips, a lot of the embassy officers did field trips. I did an awful lot all over the country, except I didn't — because of our post in Zagreb — I didn't go to Croatia or Slovenia very much. And sometimes in remote towns local officials and security people would be suspicious; I wouldn't say hostile, but unfriendly. But usually we had word sent ahead that we were coming and the mayor should expect to

receive us. Especially when they found out I could speak their language, the reception was almost always friendly.

Q: Lots of slivovitz.

PALMER: Lots of slivovitz, yes.

Q: What kinds of things were you getting; you'd go talk to the mayor, or the head of one of their enterprises, or to the head of the local communist organization?

PALMER: From the party officials, as expected, one received the party line almost always. We're still talking about going out of Belgrade. From others one found often a degree of frankness, often as an aside. But nonetheless there was criticism. The criticism I remember hearing, not everyplace but in many places, was that, “we're not getting our fair share of federal support, money and construction, and we need a steel mill more than those people up north do.” Everybody wanted to develop fast, and there wasn't enough to go around.

Q: You were in Belgrade during the great crisis of 1956, which would probably focus mainly on Hungary. This is around October of '56, also there was the Suez crisis at the same time and that probably was off to one side, Hungary was the big thing. How did the crushing of the Hungarian situation by the Soviets play where you were?

PALMER: Well, there were two aspects to it. I recall the federal government beefed up its forces along the border to make sure there wouldn't be any military spillover. And then there was a very serious refugee flow, mainly into Voivodina, a region in the northeast of Serbia which is partly Hungarian anyway. I was not very much involved. Our AID and economic officers were, and of course the ambassador, and we had voluntary agencies come in, and the Yugoslav authorities accepted this outside help—it was very welcome to them.

Q: Did you find, at least your impression, that there was any change in the attitude toward the United States up and down the line, both within the party and private people concerned about wanting to support, for example, the United States because it looked like the Soviets might go in anywhere.

PALMER: I do recall that the Soviet invasion of Hungary did reconfirm the rectitude of Yugoslavia's going its separate way. I don't recall when we started military aid assistance program. I don't know whether that triggered it or not. I remember we made available some modern aircraft.

Q: But we were giving some there about that time already.

PALMER: Yes, we were. I think we beefed it up as a result. I remember we had a military assistance program.

Q: James Riddleberger was the ambassador.

PALMER: A great man, yes.

Q: How did he operate from your perspective?

PALMER: He was a great teacher. He led, at least from my perspective, by example rather than exhortation. I remember when I first arrived and reported to the embassy I was told that everybody was up in the ambassador's suite, and I went up there and was introduced. Joan Clark was his admin assistant at that time, and she brought me in, and he said, “Steve Palmer. You can be in charge of these.” And what they were doing was stapling together the English and Serbo-Croatian versions of the final Trieste Accord. So my first job was stapling, everybody was stapling—don't mix them up. He and Millie were very warm, very caring about the staff, entertained graciously and often, assisted those who needed assistance. I have the greatest respect and the fondest recollection of them.

Q: You had dealt with the Macedonian thing in your paper, did you get down and do much around Macedonia and take a look at it?

PALMER: I was down several times, not only in Skopje but out in the boondocks. I never really knew if they ever connected me to that book, I doubt it. There was no specific indication that they did, but they had focused on the book when it came out. And yes, I could give Macedonia no more attention than I could give the situation in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia—Herzegovina, that's a lot to cover.

Q: Did you ever get involved with the Greek embassy there. Did they ever beard you on the Macedonia situation?

PALMER: No, I don't remember anything like that. It was mostly a newspaper war, as I recall, part of the campaign on the part of Skopje and Athens that continued. I had one incident which may be of interest which occurred to me on a field trip in Titograd, Montenegro. I was down there, according to a tradition which we set, to call on the President of Montenegro and head of the Communist Party of Montenegro on New Year's Day. So I was there New Year's eve, in a hotel that was fairly new but was already decrepit and odoriferous, and a fairly unpleasant place. I was having dinner alone. There was much noise from one of the alcoves where a private party was in progress and it turned out to be Chinese. I asked the waiter, “Who are these Chinese?” And he said, “They're from the embassy in Tirana. They come here very frequently because it's so much better here than it is there.” And in another area of the hotel dining room there was a really raucous party of people who turned out to be, I was told by the waiter, a film group. They were making a film about the war. One of my contacts from the press office came in and we were talking about the next day's events, and he took me over and introduced me to this crowd of young men and women movie stars, and this one man looked at me very intently and with an unfriendly air. To make a long story short, he got me off alone and pulled a knife and threatened to kill me. He kept calling me a German, and telling me how his family had been decimated by the SS troops, and he was going to kill me. I guess

my Serbo-Croatian was accented enough so he knew I was foreign and thought I was a German speaking Serbo-Croatian. I had a devil of a time proving that I was an American because he didn't know much about America—I talked about baseball. I was desperate, this fellow was absolutely smashed on slivovitz and he had this knife on my Adam's apple. Anyway, someone came in and disengaged him, but that was a colorful trip.

Q: Was there any concern in the embassy for the problem of the Albanian minority at that time, particularly in Macedonia and in Kosovo.

PALMER: Yes, especially in the Kosmet, and it was very hard to break through the walls that the authorities set against foreigners getting together with prominent Albanians in the academic world, or in any endeavor. That was very much alive, and we were very much aware that the Albanians felt extremely put upon by the Serbs.

Q: Did there seem to be, because of what's happening right today in Bosnia, did Bosnia-Herzegovina seem to be a problem, or not at that time?

PALMER: Let me answer it by this. Various people back in Washington had advocated the establishment of another consulate in the country, and the embassy was asked to comment on whether it should be in Skopje, there were those who supported that; or in Sarajevo. And I, and eventually the ambassador and the embassy as a whole, agreed that Sarajevo was the best place for two reasons. One, it was where the nationality question loomed largest; and two, it was where a lot of defense related enterprises were being established. The old partisan concept of having things in the mountains. So Sarajevo was determined, and it was largely because it was deemed to be the best place to observe the continuing playing out of the nationality question.

Q: Before we turn to your time in Sarajevo, were you aware of problems in the United States, criticism of our policy there often spurred by Croatian or Slovenian Americans, particularly in the Cleveland-Chicago-Los Angeles areas?

PALMER: Yes, although I can't recall that it had any impact on those of us working in the embassy. I know whereof you speak because during my days at the University of Indiana I got to know some of the Macedonian—IMRO, International Macedonian Revolution Organization—people in Indianapolis.

Q: Like the IRA.

PALMER: Yes, Indianapolis is their center. We were aware, but we just treated it as a remnant of the war years, and the pre-war years, when there was great Serbian hegemony over the whole country.

Q: The IMRO, what were they striving for at that time?

PALMER: They were striving traditionally for an independent Macedonia, including northern Greece and western Bulgaria.

Q: Normally, this seemed to be fought out in the field of linguistics. They would have a meeting of academics of the Balkans who they would try to get together. It seemed to fall apart because is Macedonia a language or not, or a dialect. You moved to Sarajevo where you were from '57 to '59. How were living conditions in Sarajevo?

PALMER: Not bad. The consulate and the consul's quarters were in the same rather large, and very old, pre-Victorian building. I guess it had been someone's mansion at one time. It was turned into a museum after we closed the post. It was on a hill fairly close to the center of town, everything worked, and we had very pleasant quarters. As far as living conditions, creature comforts, it was a pleasant place to be.

Q: When you went out there, Riddleberger was still the ambassador?

PALMER: Yes. Rankin became ambassador shortly thereafter.

Q: What were your instructions when you went out there? What were you going to do?

PALMER: I don't recall having any. I had been sort of the driving force for setting up the post so I guess they figured I knew what to do. What I remember is a, let us know when we can help sort of attitude. I had a vice consul, his wife was our secretary, that was the American staff. Besides a driver, I think we had three foreign service nationals. It was not a visa issuing post, so most of our work was reporting and with a goodly amount of social security and VA check-up work, and many, many visits to villages to ascertain whether old so-and-so was still alive.

Q: ...told you, take me to your marble monument, a phrase I have learned. Everybody was buried under marble until you went out there it looked awfully like cement. Were you finding a different perspective by being out there?

PALMER: Yes, I think so. For one thing it was possible to be on relatively close personal terms with really all of the key leaders. One bit of advice, which was given to me by a newspaperman, who later became head of the winter Olympics Committee, was to become a hunter and a fisherman for the first time in my life. I bought the equipment and when they found out I would like to go on hunting trips, or fishing trips—mostly hunting, I was invited to almost every one, and these were really the movers and shakers of Bosnia-Herzegovina, almost without exception they were hunters. So the camaraderie of going out in the afternoon and sleeping in a bunked room, and getting up before dawn and having breakfast of slivovitz and meat pie and then going out to shoot wild boar; one becomes a little close, and I think I was able to extract — I think there was a mutual frankness that one could not have acquired just with normal field trips.

Q: You meet somebody, and then you're on to the next appointment.

PALMER: It was harder in Montenegro which was part of our district just because I wasn't living there, but I think we had the Bosnia-Herzegovina situation pretty well taped.

Q: How did you see the political situation in that area?

PALMER: The nationality situation?

Q: Yes, the political situation.

PALMER: Well, on the one hand one saw intermarriage, mixed neighborhoods, an absence of any pronounced violence. On the other hand we saw in little newspapers, including often sometimes religious periodicals, evidence that so-and-so had been sentenced to umpteen years because of bad mouthing another nationality group, it was usually Muslims who were sentenced. Sometimes Serbs for bad mouthing Muslims, but usually it was Muslims for bad mouthing the Tito government. So obviously there was a bubbling of animosities. But at that time, of course, one didn't foresee how much the Tito type of government would devolve and fragment. If one had, I guess I wouldn't have been as optimistic as I was at the time about the eventual damping down of these old animosities.

Q: What had the Muslims done during the war? Had they been used against the Orthodox?

PALMER: Some had been used by the Ustashi against the Serbs, the Orthodox. A lot had gone with Tito. But the partisan units had large Muslim elements, very few came out in extremely senior positions, but some of them did. And certainly people like Djuro Pucar, the president, and Osman Karabegovic the number two man, they both were partisans. Karabegovic was one of the most prominent Muslims of the revolution. His wife also had fought with Tito's Partisans. When my wife called on Mm. Karabegovic, the latter displayed a scar from a bullet which had hit her just under a breast. In those two years, and I think Nick Andrews who succeeded me in Sarajevo would agree, we did not perceive any strong divisions within the party apparatus on the basis of nationality.

Q: I don't have a feel for the situation today, but there's a certain feeling that Sarajevo was the cosmopolitan place where people were intermarrying. Whereas in the old days we would call them sort of hillbillies who were off in the hills, this is where the animosities were kept alive, but these would be the equivalent to what I guess we'd call them red necks today, that one wouldn't meet either politically or socially.

PALMER: I think you have a very good point there, and certainly despite what we were able to accomplish on a personal relationship basis on the republic level, we certainly didn't have anything like that in Travnik, or Bosanska Gradiska, or Mostar where I spent quite a bit of time. The latter was fairly cosmopolitan and open-minded. Of course, you had about half Serb and half Croat with a sprinkling of Muslims. No, but I think that's a good point. People in the villages who hadn't moved and its become obvious a lot of them were living in the past.

Q: As you traveled around were you aware of the Yugoslav preparations for a war, essentially I guess against the Soviets, but using Bosnia as a mountain redoubt.

PALMER: That was our assumption. It made no economic sense to establish defense industries in these almost inaccessible places. So that was part of the mystique.

Q: I found myself one time doing a field trip, that the foreign ministry had set up and all of a sudden in a place and it was supposedly a cellulose factory, and I realized when I got in, half way through, that every question I was asking, it was a munitions factory. But they called it a cellulose factory and all I wanted to do was get the hell out of there before it blew up.

When Carl Rankin came did you get any feel for his tenure there?

PALMER: No. We had a pleasant visit and I introduced him to the people in power. We had a good talk. He wanted to know if there was anything more they needed to do to support us. No, I didn't get any feel for his overall stewardship in the mission.

Q: Were there any major events while you were there with Yugoslav relations with the United States, or else even in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro?

PALMER: No, it was very calm. It was quiet in that sense. Perhaps it was because we were the only post from any country in the city and the area. We never had that kind of a rumor mill.

Q: Usually diplomats feed off each other.

PALMER: Right. We were it.

Q: What were you getting on these hunting trips, and other times, from the local leaders at the republican level as far as how they looked upon Tito.

PALMER: Well, none of them spoke out of school in terms of the national leadership. What I was able to perceive was a realization that their then economic system was inefficient and a hankering to try something else, but without going all the way to free market capitalism, and the whole idea of worker management was beginning to bubble up. I put my vice consul mainly in charge of the economic reporting. What we perceived was a lot of stumbling around in terms of this worker management concept and unhappiness on the part of the old party faithful who had been paid off for their wartime experience by being made managers, and were now having their authority diluted, or perhaps being let go. So there was that what I would say sociological unrest. I remember the mayor of Sarajevo very well, Ljubo Kojo, he's the one whom I put on the path of securing the old Washington trolley cars, the first in Sarajevo, or at least the first modern ones there. I remember he was always asking me about how things worked in this country, trying to

think how to adapt his management of city affairs more efficiently and more fairly. So one could do a little bit of missionary work. They were receptive to that.

Q: Did we have a USIS establishment there?

PALMER: No, that came after the consulate was closed.

Q: How about when you were in Belgrade and Sarajevo, was Milovan Djilas a figure to play with?

PALMER: Oh, very much. I regret that I never called on him. As I recall I was discouraged from doing so by my superiors at the embassy. I lived when we first moved into Belgrade in temporary quarters for some months, I lived right across the street from him. I used to see him going out on walks. I always regret that I never had any personal contact with him.

Q: Was he somebody to whom people would refer to as far as his thoughts about the new class, and the stratification of the communist society?

PALMER: Yes, in hushed tones and mostly if they were members of the ancien regime.

Q: When you left Sarajevo in 1959, what were your thoughts whither Yugoslavia at that time?

PALMER: I was basically optimistic that the nationality problems could be further eased. And this was assuming that the power structure of the country remained about the same. That is, a relatively benevolent dictatorship centrally controlled, and that the big changes would be on the economic front with a degree not of capitalism, but a system with some profit motive involved. I was optimistic.

Q: When I left in '67 I was too. What about communism as a belief of philosophy? What was your impression of how well that was taking?

PALMER: Well, I had become convinced in my initial research and nothing in my almost five years there dissuaded me that the reason a lot of communists were communists was because of the nationality question, and particularly because of the great Serb hegemony over the country in the inter-war period. And this was certainly true on the part of a lot of the Croatian communists, and Macedonian communists, and Bosnian communists. As you well know, despite the atrocities of which the Tito people were guilty during the war, and shortly after the war, it became a relatively benevolent form of communism. They only became tough when influential people, people in positions of economic or political power began to question too deeply.

Q: I can understand why the Yugoslav would say, okay, because I think we felt this way too, that at least this is a unifying thing. I mean, American policy was essentially that Yugoslavia wanted to stay outside the Soviet orbit, and too, it doesn't fall apart because we'd end up in a war there because of the Soviet presence which would take advantage of that. So Titoism seemed to make, from our point of view, an awful lot of sense. But other than that were you finding that the Yugoslavs that you'd meet in positions of authority believed in the tenets of communism, or was it just a means to an end?

PALMER: This is too global an assessment, but I would say more of the latter than the former. And particularly the intellectuals whom diplomats tended to meet. They were as unregimented mentally as any people in western Europe.

Q: It never really took the way it did in the Soviet Union. It never even approached that degree.

PALMER: I think that's a fair statement.

Q: You left there in '59 and you went back to the Department where you served from '59 to '62. What were you up to?

PALMER: Well, I guess whoever was in control of assignments, assumed that I needed a major broadening career change. So I was put into the Office of UN Political Affairs which then as I suppose now was a very hot shop, and with very good people. I was put in charge of Middle Eastern Affairs which at that time meant Arab-Israel affairs mainly, and Arab-Israel affairs were indeed very hot during the years I was there. So it was a very rich professional experience.

Q: Let's first talk a little about the structure. Who were the heads of UN affairs when you were there?

PALMER: Elizabeth Brown was there initially but during most of the time I was there Joe Sisco and Bill Cargo were there. Bill was in charge I guess until he left, then Joe became a very vigorous director. So Joe was there almost the whole time I was there, and up in the front office we had people like Harlan Cleveland and Fran Wilcox most of the time. That was the structure. In a lot of what I had to do with, the front office was involved in because of the political sensitivity.

Q: Let's talk a little about people, then we'll move on. When Joe Sisco was there, we have many, many impressions of him as an operator par excellence within the bureaucratic world. How did you find him?

PALMER: Well, I found Joe smart and I found him opportunistic. Just one little thing yet. Whenever Bill Cargo, the Director, would leave on a trip, even though it was only for a couple of days, Joe would move from his office next door into Bill's office. I must not forget that Bill Buffum was there. He's one of my favorite seniors.

Q: In what way?

PALMER: He must have been Deputy Director after Joe moved up. He was a very fine superior. I dealt with him at every possible chance. He was very square, and very honest,

helpful, a good man to work for. It was a testing experience in terms of the multiple crises and long hours, but it was fruitful.

Q: In the UN Affairs, in the first place, where did the Bureau fit within the Department? Who was responsible?

PALMER: As a junior officer I never gravitated — well, I did after I sort of established myself with NEA. The pertinent NEA officer who was very often Jim Ludlow or Bill Crawford, and I would both sit in and take notes. For instance, when Golda Meir called on Dean Rusk. So, laterally it was with NEA, of course, in my particular job. I must confess, whether the Assistant Secretary reported to...

Q: Probably. Were you there from '59 to '62, those three years?

PALMER: Almost four in all.

Q: What were the major issues on this Israeli-Arab-UN beat that you had to deal with?

PALMER: There were three or four. Very prominent among them was the problem of the Palestine refugees, the care and feeding, and the determination on the part of some to try to find a resolution to their problem. Let me go into more detail if you're interested. Then there were these very frequent armistice zone, or demilitarized zone violations which went to the Security Council. These were most usually, but not always, instances where Israeli farmers and armor-plated bulldozers and tractors, would attempt to cultivate fields in the demilitarized zones in contravention of the armistice agreement provisions. That's what we, the United States, thought, and that's what everybody else in the UN thought, except the Israelis. But when they did so, almost always the Syrians would try to shoot at those incursions, and then Israel would bring it to the Security Council, and we would have to debate. I don't know how many speeches I wrote for Adlai Stevenson on that. The Security Council would almost always decide “a plague on both your houses,” but not blaming the Syrians because the Israelis were also culpable we felt.

A third major area of concentration was the division of the Jordan River waters. As you know, water was considered the lifeblood of Israel. This was after the Eric Johnston plan which was focused on that, but there was still a lot of diplomacy with the Jordanians and the Israelis and the Syrians about the water divisions. There were also armed encounters between Israelis and Jordanians although they were less frequent. Then, the old question of the status of Jerusalem, which was relatively quiescent although we had in those days some Senators calling us to move the embassy, etc., usually before presidential elections.

Those were the main Arab-Israel areas of engagement.

Q: Let's talk about the Palestine refugee problem. What were the facts that you were dealing with during this '59 to '63 period?

PALMER: We were dealing with a seemingly intractable problem. United States was the main contributor to the UN agency which was supporting the refugees in camps in Jordan and the Gaza strip where conditions were poor, and the schooling was poor. Some felt, and I was among them, that if we could only ameliorate this human problem of the Israeli-Arab confrontation, that some of the other problems would likely fall into place more easily—reach a resolution more easily. So this initiative was started. I think I would credit two officers in NEA for the genesis and most of the work on it. One was Armin Meyer, who was the Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary, and the other was William Crawford who was the Israel Desk Officer. They began to draw on me as a resource for this initiative.During the early part of the Kennedy administration on the Palestine refugees. We devised a plan which would involve several steps. One of which was to educate the Palestine refugees that their uncle's, or father's, or grandfather's orange grove was now a high rise apartment and there was no going back to what they had. Just to educate them about the tremendous changes. The second one was to give a choice between a very generous grant to help them resettle in the Arab world, or, if they insisted, a small proportion would be allowed to return to what was then Israel, and more or less shift for themselves. And to negotiate this plan the government engaged then — I guess

he was then head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Joseph Johnson. He was the point man for it. So that was the biggest initiative, and really the only initiative during the then administration, and during my time in UNP. Joe Johnson came and went among the pertinent capitals, and he made some tentative agreements with the Israelis, and agreement with the Jordanians. The Syrians held out. It wasn't until I was actually assigned to Tel Aviv that that initiative played itself out.

Q: How optimistic were you about Joseph Johnson's work?

PALMER: We didn't think it was going to be easy. The Foreign Service officers, and certainly Joe Johnson himself were and I think President Kennedy also indicated that it was certainly worth a try. It was a very fair plan; we thought no reasonable people would reject it once they had all the pertinent facts. Johnson was a superb negotiator. And if we could help reduce the tension in these other problems, it would be very worthwhile. Putting people first and their suffering and alleviating that, was a major motivation.

Q: Did you have the feeling in dealing with the Arabs and the Jews that you were back in Yugoslavia, the tribal things?

PALMER: I felt at home in that setting, yes.

Q: How did this work as far as you were in the UN bureau, how much of relations with our staff delegation in New York?

PALMER: I went up there a few times for routine orientation. The direct contact was handled usually by Joe Sisco or Bill Buffum. Of course, during a General Assembly there would always be a NEA person there and I was in touch with him—I think they were all male. But on these high profile Security Council debates, I was just the guy who turned out the boiler plate.

Q: Did you notice any difference between — you were there at the end of the Eisenhower administration and when the Kennedy administration came in, in your particular bailiwick about feeling towards the UN, and on the Israeli-Arab issue?

PALMER: About the UN I don't recall any. About the Arab-Israeli issue, we were very gratified that Kennedy and Rusk were receptive to the idea of an initiative. It was not an idea which was welcomed by the traditional pro-Israel lobby in the United States. The White House was very skillful in marshaling. I've forgotten his exact title, at the White House, Meyer Feldman to help contain this backfire that the lobby was putting up against the initiative. We professionals after so many years, almost decades of administration's fear of trying anything that the Israel lobby would not like, were extremely gratified at the courage, because it took courage for the Kennedy administration to do this.

Q: Then the Kennedy administration was not a captive of what became known as the Israeli Lobby.

PALMER: Not at that time, no. I don't think that it ever became one. They were attentive as all intelligent politicians must be to the concerns of the supporters of Israel, but as evidenced by the work of Meyer Feldman the Jewish community in the United States is not by any means monolithic in its attitudes towards...

Q: What was the traditional Israeli lobby position?

PALMER: On the so-called Johnston Plan? It was that there should not be any element of choice whatsoever. That there would be any, even a handful, of refugees returning to what was then Israel. And that all of them should be resettled in the Arab world, and they really didn't deserve much compensation because they were basically at fault.

Q: What was your impression of meetings with Golda Meir, for example, when she came?

PALMER: She was one tough old girl. I got to know her pretty well in Tel Aviv, in Jerusalem. I remember very clearly one session she had in Washington with Dean Rusk in which he was expressing grave concern about evidence that the Israelis were working toward the development of atomic nuclear weapons. She said there had been research in the field but that they were not aiming at having atomic weapons. I don't think at that time they had devised this formula that they would not be the first to introduce them to the area. I'm not saying that they didn't have them. I remember it was a really serious confrontation. Rusk was very, very serious, very grave about it.

Q: What about with Golda Meir and Israeli? We're talking about up to '63. Was there almost a repeat of like the Macedonian thing, that there was no such thing as a Palestinian, or a Palestinian territory? Because Golda Meir has been quoted at some point as saying, there's no such thing as Palestinians.

PALMER: Yes, as you know she spent the early part of her life in Milwaukee and was a convert to Zionism. In contrast to Abba Eban, who was Foreign Minister during part of that period and who was born in Cairo, and knows Arabic and understands Arabs very well, I think Golda Meir was an example of the really hard nose, no compromise school. Even more so than Ben Gurion, and certainly more so than Eshkol. She was hard to negotiate with because she did have her mind very firmly made up. But on the question of Palestinian nationality, one could not visit the Palestinian refugee camps, or see Palestinians outside the camp, and not realize that there was something special to identify those people. They certainly didn't consider themselves Jordanians, and there wasn't any other country around. So as inchoate as it may have been, and I still think there was a Palestinian ethnicity.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point, and we'll pick up when you went to Tel Aviv the next time.

One other question, could you comment about the Arabists in NEA. These were the people who studied Arabic and have often been seen as, particularly in the earlier times, as being not friendly towards Israel. What was your impression? You're the new boy on the block, and you didn't have a commitment one way or another.

PALMER: I think I can comment on that more interestingly in regard to my tour in Tel Aviv. But in my tour in UNP, NEA had various assistant secretaries, some of whom were Arabists, Parker Hart. I worked, as I said, closely with Armin Meyer who is not an Arabist. Bill Crawford, I think, was an Arabist. Dick Parker was a player in those days. I found that on a historical basis some of the old timers would say, well, Loy Henderson was right, we shouldn't have recognized Israel, and this is looking for trouble. But I found no one who didn't accept Israel, and American support for Israel, as being in our national interest. There was no one who did not recognize what the Jews in Europe went through in the Second World War. In other words, I didn't find pro-Arab sentiment to any extent which impeded their all-American interest stand. I mean, their ability to put the United States interest first. It was in a state of flux at that time. Arabists were not being assigned to Tel Aviv because it was thought that that would ruin their career in the Arab world, and there was no visitation between officers in the Arab posts and Tel Aviv, and visa versa. We can talk about that later, that changed. But in terms of the negotiations, in terms of day-to-day handling of events, I think our so-called Arabists were adequately even-handed.

Q: Today is the 14th of June 1995. Steve was there anything that you wanted to put where we had been before that we might have missed? Or should we start with Tel Aviv?

PALMER: Well, either way. There is one significant aspect of Sarajevo experience that I wanted to get on record. I could do it later.

Q: Why don't we do it now.

PALMER: Okay. Obviously there were no English-language schools there for our two daughters who were in grade school, and for our son whom before we left Sarajevo was of kindergarten age. My wife taught both daughters who were at different levels by the Calvert School method, which was a good experience in terms of family cohesion. And when we returned to the States, those girls stood very, very well at the Chevy Chase Elementary School. Our son went to a local Sarajevo kindergarten and one of the first days he returned home pretty well beat up. He was bruised, a black eye, etc., and it developed that he had been picked on because he was a foreigner. And in speaking with the principal about it later, he told me that our son had fought very well, and he beat up some other guys when they picked on him. You asked me how life was in Sarajevo.

Q: So we'll move to Tel Aviv, and you were there from '63 to '66.

PALMER: Yes.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

PALMER: Had a very fine ambassador. I have been fortunate in my career generally with ambassadors. Walworth Barbour was the ambassador throughout the time I was there, and a great deal longer. And then after NEA and the system had picked me to be head of the political section in Tel Aviv, I was asked to go up to Gloucester, Mass. where Barbour was summering in his beach house nearby, in order to let him peruse and comment on this Johnston Plan about which I spoke earlier on the Arab refugee settlement proposals. And I hadn't realized until I got there that this was also an opportunity for Barbour to look me over. Apparently he did this with most officers being assigned, or being proposed for Tel Aviv. I remember the first question he asked me was whether I played golf, and I said I didn't. And he said, why not? And I said I hadn't grown up in a place where golf was accessible for people of modest means, and he said, do you play bridge? And I said, yes, I do play bridge. He said, are you good? I said my wife was very good, and I guessed I was okay. And he said, well that's good. Then he barbecued a meal for the two of us, I think his

sister was there too, and retired to read this voluminous plan, a very complicated plan. He said he'd see me over breakfast. I was just amazed at his thorough comprehension of the ins and outs of this very intricate plan just from apparently one reading the night before. A very swift learner. In the meantime I guess he decided that I would be okay for that post, and he said, you get a set of golf clubs and I'll see you in Tel Aviv.

So immediately I arrived the actual negotiations regarding that plan were very much on center stage. Johnston had visited Tel Aviv and the pertinent Arab posts, and now our task was to persuade the Israelis to go along with it, bilaterally persuade them. It was tough sledding. Golda Meir was very questioning of it, and Eshkol who had become Prime Minister, was more open minded but not fully persuaded. They were intensive negotiations, and as you know we were in Tel Aviv and the Foreign Ministry was in Jerusalem so we'd go up there often, the appointments were late in the afternoon and we'd arrive back well into the evening and then I'd have to do the reporting cables. So it was an arduous time.

The long and short of it, without going into all the details, was that the Syrians sabotaged the plan as they had previous plans about sharing the Jordan waters. And that gave the Israelis an excuse, which I think they really wanted, if the Syrians can't buy it, they couldn't buy it. So that was a wash, and that was the last significant initiative of the Kennedy administration in regard to any Arab-Israel negotiation.

Q: What was the feeling in the embassy when you got there—here was this plan, and you had people in the political section who were experienced in this type of negotiation, knew the Israelis, how did they feel about the plan?

PALMER: Well, as a matter of fact — I don't want this to sound overly proud, you've come upon one of the factors that made it somewhat difficult to deal aptly with the Israelis, and that is because of our policy of generally not staffing the embassy with persons who were steeped in the Near East and the Arab-Israel problem particularly. There had been indeed

a kind of a pattern of people going there from wherever they were before, from Turkey, or western Europe, or wherever. And they were really impressed by the Israelis and became, not partisan, but in some cases overly sympathetic to the Israeli point of view. And it was simply because they didn't have experience on both sides. Whereas I, albeit being in Washington then a little bit in New York, had dealt with Arab-Israel issues for almost four years and that was the reason I was assigned there in the first place. So I had in my section two excellent officers, neither of whom had served in Israel before, nor in the Arab world: George Lambrakis and John Leonard. They were just terrific. They handled mostly the internal political situation which was a big thing to handle, and I dealt with the foreign ministry and the international stuff. So there wasn't any resistance in the Embassy. The then DCM who was a very nice man had never had any experience in the Arab world.

Q: Who was that?

PALMER: That was Spencer Barnes initially, and he was replaced by an economic officer named William Dale. I had mentioned earlier that while I was in Tel Aviv, we and my counterparts in the Arab posts, initiated the first ever exchanges of visits, and I went to the Arab capitals of the neighboring states to Israel. I never did get to Damascus. I well remember the first sessions that I went to, Cairo where my counterpart was Don Bergus, and by coincidence the National War College visit was on while I was there, so I was invited to the reception for them. It was very touching when the word got around among the Egyptian officials, most of whom were high ranking military officers, that this was a political officer from our Embassy in Tel Aviv. They all clustered around me and were just so eager to find out my thoughts on things; they were open minded I thought. So all of the counterparts, Don Bergus and Dick Parker from Beirut, I've forgotten who was in Amman, and Dick Murphy from Damascus, subsequently paid visits to me, and I instituted for them, and also used for other occasions, stag luncheons. I found by having a stag affair during the working day I could attract really the top Israelis, for instance, one regular was the head of military intelligence. They were just absolutely frank exchanges between my Arabist friends from the neighboring posts, and these very high ranking Israeli officials,

Foreign Ministry as well as Defense. I think it was a constructive small step in the right direction.

Another factor in our tour in Tel Aviv was our oldest daughter attended the American Community School in Beirut. And at that time the Lebanese authorities, on being asked by our embassy there, said there was no problem at all for us to just drive up to the city, and they would arrange it at the crossing point, but please don't use your Israeli license plates. Fortunately I hadn't thrown away our expired Maryland plates so I used those for our crossings, and to take her to and from school. That also worked for our occasional visits to the Old City of Jerusalem and to Amman. We spent an annual leave in Amman, and we spent another one in Beirut. This was another instance of reaching out and trying to get a feel for the other side.

Q: What was your impression of the Israeli government apparatus at the time you were there? It was the Labor Party I gather.

PALMER: Yes, it was the Labor Party and no one gave the Herut party, later Likud, any chance of ever getting into power. I remember people sort of scoffed at me because I called on Menachem Begin once and had a fascinating historical review with him. But you know, why waste your time with someone like that. Yes, of course, they had locked up the whole Labor apparatus which also owns huge companies, which was a huge employer in itself. So you had the situation which still obtains where the religious parties, some very Orthodox, elements, have a swing power much greater than their numbers because they provide the government with its majority. But it was a formidable apparatus. I think the fascinating thing was that there was within each party a wide range of views from doves to hawks in the case of national security and also regarding social issues.

One of the phenomenon that John Leonard, one of my officers, kept an eye on was the growing political clout of the Sephardic immigrants, mostly from Arab countries, which was new. They were sort of preempted by the Labor Party, but they began to become more

politically sensitive and sensible of their own numbers. That phenomenon of feeling left out by the Europe origin of Ashkenazim was really one of the factors that led to Begin's electoral victory.

Q: I'm told by people who served in Tel Aviv that it's both a political officers heaven and a nightmare because everybody talks, they're extremely articulate, but overload is the name of the game.

PALMER: That's true, and I think it was particularly challenging for the officers who were focused on the domestic political situation. For instance, George Lambrakis had a very fine relationship with Shimon Peres; I think they were about the same age and they got along very well together. I developed a good personal relationship with Abba Eban, whom I found very straightforward, and honest. So it was really fun.

One little sidelight, by this time I was into my fifth year of dealing with Arab-Israel affairs, and I applied for on-the-job Arabic language training with a tutor. There were plenty of Arabs who could have done it, it could have helped me. FSI turned me down. They said that Israel was not a proper place to study Arabic. My career would have been quite different had I been able at least to start Arabic training there.

Q: In the first place, Walworth Barbour, he was in Israel for a very long time as some of our ambassadors were. I mean, Sam Lewis is another one. I've heard that this is both good and bad, you have wonderful contacts, but the other one is that its very easy for clientitis to take over. Was this reflected in what you were doing, and what he was doing?

PALMER: Wally indeed was very warm-hearted to the centrality of Israeli experience, and they responded with great affection. For instance, on these refugee problem negotiations, my initiation with him and the Israeli establishment. He was very tenacious, he was a darn hard negotiator, and I'm sure nobody could have done any better than he. On the question of Israel's then incipient nuclear arms development, he was very tough. He realized the

criticality of that. Nobody in the embassy, to my knowledge—no other State person at least—was in on some of the details of that, they were so highly classified.

As you may recall, we collectively in the Department and the embassy, felt that we could at least deter the Israelis from developing nuclear weapons capability if we provided them with conventional arms. It ended up that they had both, but it was a worthwhile ploy. And I know some of the Arab post colleagues thought that would be the end of the world if we provided conventional arms to Israel. Well, it turned out not to be such a bum idea.

Q: How did you view our other posts? I'm particularly thinking of our embassies in Beirut, Damascus, Amman, and Cairo, perhaps Riyadh, as far as how they were presenting the case, and did you find yourself almost having to carry on a defensive dialogue with them in your reporting?

PALMER: No, not really. I think the visits exchanges had helped. I do not recall any degree of clientitis on the part of my counterparts in their reporting. There had been a traditional institutional antagonism between our post in Jerusalem, which was an independent post as you know, independent the embassy in Tel Aviv. During my initial period in Tel Aviv I was struck by the occasional bitterness on the part of the consul general or the ambassador in open reporting; it became almost personal. Some of us worked on that, and we established to both to them that the other was a worthy colleague, and they began to get along okay.

Q: Who was the consul general?

PALMER: Evan Wilson. He was a very fine man, very well versed. He wrote two books on the Jerusalem issue. I found him very helpful. Of course, given the, if you will, the mutual interest, particularly Amman had with us, and Beirut also in connection with the Palestine refugees, on both sides of the border we embassies knew it was important, for

instance, for the U.S. to fund adequately the Arab refugee agency. So we did some things in common.

Q: How did you view the way the Israelis dealt with their internal Arab problem?

PALMER: I think the most generous description of that would be uncle-Tomism. They were certainly second class citizens, and in some ways they still are. The Arabs who remain, and I don't want to characterize them as being very different from those who left and became refugees, but its natural that those who remained were people who were not as activist and accepted their fate more easily. Anyway, they were essentially bought off.

Q: So they didn't represent any movement.

PALMER: No. There were some Arab party leaders, particularly from the Nazareth area, who were very active in a Martin Luther King sort of way in terms of language instruction and the equivalency and the quality of education. That was going on, and there were some riots in the Nazareth area over what we in the embassy regarded as very unfortunate. Israeli seizures of Arab property. This is an area which my associate John Leonard kept a close eye on, and interestingly, after his tour in Tel Aviv was completed he left the Foreign Service and went into training as a Syrian Catholic and has been ever since in a monastery in Nazareth.

Q: What was the view of Nasser and Nasser's threats and Nasserists in the Arab world to Israel at that time. We're talking, you were there from '63 to '66.

PALMER: Well, it was considered very real by the Israelis. By that I mean that they had sporadically pretty good intelligence about some of the more bizarre military threats that he was trying to mount in terms of the Germans working on missiles, etc. So it was serious, and I think we had without a doubt a better fix on the Israeli military thinking, and their foreign intelligence, than our colleagues had vis-a-vis the Egyptian establishment at that time. It was scary.

Q: Were you getting from your military attach#s, your own contacts within the Israeli military, the idea that they were going to strike first if there was a problem.

PALMER: No. We got none of that. Certainly in terms of preparation we appreciated their capacity to do so. I was not aware of any planning in the back of their minds for preemptive strikes, unless they found, as they concluded they did in Iraq, the beginning of a nuclear weapons development.

Q: What about the Jewish lobby in the United States? Did you find yourself spending a good deal of time dealing with visitors who were coming over who were unofficial but represented Jewish interests in the United States?

PALMER: No. I mentioned earlier that during the time we were preparing for the Johnston refugee initiative, the White House, and Mike Feldman—I mentioned him earlier—was very helpful. He was the White House man specifically for the Jewish constituency of the Democratic Party. In Tel Aviv it was rather striking that the Zionist leaders, and others who visited Israel from the United States, very rarely had anything to do with the embassy. They meshed right in with the Israeli preparations for them, the government and the Jewish Agency, and others. I remember attending a big session, I mean perhaps a thousand people in a theater that was near the embassy on the waterfront, and I attended because we routinely received invitations to these things from the Israeli organizers, and I noted that Foreign Minister Golda Meir was going to give the major speech, so I attended. And she really gave them a very partisan, a very Zionist pitch. It was quite unbalanced and very spirited and emotional, and then she was just winding down when she spotted me, I was seated down front, and she said, “Oh my, I didn't realize we had a goyim here.”

Q: Did you find in your reporting that you were having to keep in mind that any reports that might be disparaging of anything in Israel, as we're always reporting around the world, but in this case that it might get leaked to the press? Did one have to take precautions to report by other means, or be a bit self-censor or not?

PALMER: We certainly didn't do any self-censoring or toning down. It never occurred to us, it really didn't. Historically, of course, there had been the case where the Israeli desk officer had his career ruined after having — well, not the Israeli desk, the Palestine desk officer. This was way back at the establishment, or right after the establishment of Israel, and the pro-Israel lobby had his career. But they knew better than to mess with us, and I think the fact that Barbour himself was held in such high regard gave us some immunity, if you will. Anyway, we reported things as we saw them, and certainly in my reports I never put on kid gloves. I did have a rather voluminous official-informal correspondence with my key NEA contact, Harry Symmes, but that practice was not unusual.

Q: So you left there in '66, before the big '67 War which changed the balance tremendously. What was your impression of whither Israel when you left in '66?

PALMER: Partly because of my professional involvement for so long in the refugee problem, I remained concerned that the people element of the Arab-Israeli problem be ameliorated. Things could become dangerous. In retrospect it was probably an over emphasis of the people element. But anyway, that's the way I felt then. I was concerned also about their attitude and actions with regard to the division, or their non-division more accurately, of the Jordan River waters. The Israeli non-sharing, or not sharing in a fair way. That underlay a lot of animosity on the part of the Syrians as well as the Jordanians. I left after three years there with a keen appreciation for the single-mindedness of the Israeli establishment to be tough, and not to be perceived as weak. And also, generally speaking, their unwillingness to foresee the possibilities of a negotiated settlement.

Q: One last question. Did golf help you? You know in some countries such as Thailand, Burma and Korea, it's almost essential to play golf but I've never heard it said that of Israel.

PALMER: Wally Barbour played golf almost every non-rainy day. So it was a personal thing with him. As a matter of fact, so overworked was I the first few months with these

negotiations, etc., and in an exhausted state one weekend, I was trimming some high rose bushes around the place where we lived, and I really put my back out, a spinal disc, and I never lifted a golf club. I sold them when I left.

Q: From Tel Aviv you went to London, is that right?

PALMER: Yes.

Q: You were there from '66 to '68. What was your position there?

PALMER: Well, surprise, surprise, it was to handle Middle Eastern affairs.

Q: Well, there's always an officer, isn't there, to...

PALMER: There has been, yes. Those jobs in the political section were, at least at that time there was one for Africa and one for East Asia as well, had a lot of autonomy because we came in as the expert on a part of the world, and people let us develop our contacts in the official and non-official circles, and maintain them without a lot of supervision. Which reminds me, at the time that the war broke out.

Q: You're talking about the June '67 war.

PALMER: Yes. I was in the embassy alone in the political section, and we had some teletype machines for Reuters and some other agencies, and all of a sudden these machines began to clatter-clatter. So I went out to see, and I thereby found out about the attacks, and I called my boss who was Bill Brubeck, and I called Phil Kaiser who was DCM, and I called David Bruce, the ambassador—another outstandingly fine gentleman. So Bruce said to collect everybody in his office, and he'd be there in one-half an hour. By that time we had a couple of flash telegrams, so I briefed him as well as I could. I had called Washington in the meantime and gotten a little bit more. Everybody was so surprised and didn't have much information. And bless his heart, the other gentlemen were talking about what we needed to do, and whom we needed to see on the British side, and

Bruce said, “Now gentlemen, Steve Palmer is the Middle East expert here, and Steve Palmer is going to be in charge of handling this in the embassy, and Steve if you need any help, you call on us, but you're going to be it.” The DCM and the political counselor readily accepted this, and I was indeed it. I called on particularly Ambassador Bruce when I thought the Foreign Secretary, for instance, should be involved and that was above my level of normal contacts.

It was another assignment in which, although I didn't live at the embassy, I spent almost all the daylight hours six-seven days a week, as I had in Tel Aviv. I saw almost nothing of England outside of London. Just because things were happening, it wasn't only that war but there was the Cyprus crisis—one of the many Cyprus crises—while I was there. And then more germane to my job was the sudden and unexpected British decision to pull out from the Gulf militarily.

Q: The Persian Gulf.

PALMER: They had known very well that we wanted them to stay. We thought it was critical that they do so, but they were in a really tough budget crunch and that was the factor which determined their decision. It was the only thing in the two years I worked there where I hadn't been tipped off by friends about some important policy matter. They were just sworn to keep that from us, and they did.

Q: How did we react to that?

PALMER: Oh, just with sadness. There was nothing we could do about it. Under instruction we went back to them, and asked them to reconsider but we in London knew that it was an irreversible change. Anyway, it turned out not to be the end of the world. But it led, naturally, to a greater U.S. military involvement in that part of the world.

Q: During the '67 war, was the ghost of the Suez crisis of '56 hanging over people? It was completely different, the British weren't involved but the point still was that this is probably

the most critical parting of the ways between the British and the Americans in '56, and I was just wondering whether these things tend to linger on when something happens in the Middle East. I was wondering whether that came back or not?

PALMER: I'm trying to recall. There was one policy difference which put strain between the Brits and us. That was occasioned by Gene Rostow, who was...

Q: National Security Advisor.

PALMER: Yes, and he had this notion about a blockade, but an active blockade, sort of shoot on sight blockade, and he wanted all the western nations to join in that effort. And the Brits wouldn't do it, and others wouldn't do it either. We in the embassy thought it was a rather foolish endeavor.

Q: This is an active blockade of Egypt basically, and Syria too. How did you find the British expertise on the Middle East?

PALMER: They had some very sharp people, very knowledgeable. I would say, again in retrospect, that the vestiges of Arabism bordering on the questioning of the whole proposition of Israel were more noticeable. They weren't noticeable at all, as I mentioned earlier, in our State establishment in those years. But there were remnants of that a bit in the UK, and the fact that I had just come from Israel gave me frequent opportunity to make some points which I thought were realistic, up and down the line in the Foreign Office with these Arabists. Some of those Brits had started out as Arabists and they had never served outside the Arab world.

Q: Did you find that in talking about Israel that your counterparts, both in Britain but I suppose whatever reflections you'd be getting from other German, French foreign services, sort of saying, well, of course, you're captive of your Jewish lobby in the United States, and therefore we can't really oppose you on a sophisticated level, or something of that nature.

PALMER: No, I think there was some appreciation, particularly during a national election campaign, be it presidential or congressional, that could not expect any administration to take any steps in the Middle East and Near East which would seriously antagonize Israel and its supporters in the United States. That was indeed an inhibition in terms of our freedom of action.

Q: How did you find the Arab representation in London at the time. I'm thinking of Syrian, Egyptian.

PALMER: I got to know all of them and the Israeli representatives. Frankly, there was only one Arab diplomat whom I found to be more than just someone who did things by rote and in a propagandistic way, and who was worthwhile keeping contact with in terms of information and insight, and that was the DCM of the Kuwaiti embassy, who happened to be a Palestinian. We became close friends in addition to being working colleagues. The others, because I had served in Israel may have been a factor, I'm not sure, I never got that close to the Egyptians and Syrians. I met King Hussein once because we got a NIACT from Washington instructing us to deliver a message to him, I've forgotten what the occasion was. I was awed by the fact that I was asked to deliver this—I guess it was in his embassy. I remember he was sitting on a very high chair and he didn't arise. I had never realized he was so short in stature.

Q: The aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war of '67, which the Israelis took Jerusalem and the West Bank, what was the general feeling from your colleagues, and not just the people you were talking to in Great Britain, about what this was going to do to the Middle Eastern situation?

PALMER: I think the consensus was that the extent of the territorial expansion was determined, not only because of security interest, but because of water, again water. The Sinai was not deemed to be anything but sort of local strategic importance, almost uninhabitable. But the taking of the Old City of Jerusalem, of course, was yet another step

in the Israeli long-established Israeli campaign to gain complete and permanent control over the whole city and its environs. So the long and the short of it was that the war was viewed to make even more difficult any negotiated settlement. In the longer range that view was proven at least somewhat off base.

Q: I note that you got the superior honor award while you were in London.

PALMER: That was just for reporting and my contact-making.

Q: You then left London and went off to a somewhat different terrain. You went to Pakistan.

PALMER: Yes.

Q: You were there from '68 to '71. What were you doing there?

PALMER: I was political counselor in Islamabad, actually the embassy was still located in Rawalpindi when I first arrived, although we shortly moved to Islamabad. That was a different kind of experience than I had had. For one reason, I had not been steeped in South Asian affairs. I had long been interested in that part of the world, but never studied it, I had no Urdu. But it turned out to be a fascinating time to be in Islamabad. It was more difficult for me because we had at the time a non-career ambassador.

Q: Benjamin Oehlert.

PALMER: Benjamin Oehlert, yes, who was formerly with the Minutemaid Division of Coca Cola, and who had led a Republican group for Lyndon Johnson's campaign. And the long and short of it is that the Oehlerts and Palmers did not get along very well. Only after it was all over did I realize how deeply antagonistically they felt towards my wife. Those were the days when efficiency reports, as you recall, commented on the spouses. And also

there was a portion which one never saw. So I had no idea until after I returned someone in Personnel pointed it out what a vicious report he had done on her, mostly.

Q: What was the problem?

PALMER: It had to do with Mrs. Oehlert's, I suppose only natural, assumption that all the embassy wives would do things at her beck and call, volunteer for pouring tea, and one thing and another, and my wife had other interests, particularly connected with the school and working the wives of some of my key contacts. I remember her asking me—I've forgotten—Mrs. Oehlert wants me to do this, and do I have to do that. I said, no, you don't have to do that. Enough of that. It certainly set back my career because the performance report was deemed, when I questioned it after reading it a couple of years later, to be so prejudicial that the whole thing was wiped out. So there's been that blank in my record, a whole year with a blank, and certainly it affected adversely my career because boards saw it and naturally wondered.

Q: What was the political situation like in Pakistan when you got there in '68?

PALMER: It was beginning to bubble, notably on the part of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto whose following was increasing. And also on the part of the East Pakistan opposition leader, Mujibur Rahman. It was a difficult situation to follow. I went over to East Pakistan quite frequently. There had been sort of traditional rivalry between the consulate general in Dhaka and the embassy. I decided that was foolish, and I went over there and mended fences, and got to know Mujib quite well. We helped redirect the reporting and we got really good reporting out of Dhaka. In West Pakistan the ambassador didn't want his officers to go trucking around with the opposition because the conventional wisdom was that the military would always be in control. We had a very able political officer in Karachi who had connections with Bhutto. That was Doug Cochran who later became, among other things, CG in Madras. He and I cooked up a session with Bhutto, and I got the ambassador's permission to meet with him as long as it was private and not publicized.

Bhutto was in Rawalpindi in a hotel suite and invited my wife and me to come by for an evening after dinner. On Bhutto's side there was a Pushtu couple, a retired officer who later became involved in Bhutto's campaign. Thus there were two women, the officer's wife and my wife. And Bhutto and I talked with the retired officer not adding much. We talked for four hours, and we talked about everything. I found him a very compelling personality, very strong, and found his outlook essentially balanced. He was obviously reaching out to the United States. I had brought a bottle of Pinch which I understood he liked very much, and he said, “No, no, I have my own, you take that back and we'll drink mine.” So the three of us went through his, and then we started on mine.

Q: Pinch bottle of scotch.

PALMER: Right. Well, anyway, he was relaxed by the end of the evening which I suppose contributed to his frankness. Anyway, I did an extensive memorandum of conversation, and I did a reporting cable, and my superiors decided that there shouldn't be any reporting cable, or even an airgram. It shouldn't be in the record because somehow it might disturb our relationship. But I could send a memcon in to the desk, and I guess I sent a copy to INR. A couple years later when Bhutto became Prime Minister, I'd gone of course, our then the ambassador who was Hank Byroade called on Bhutto to congratulate him and said, “We've got to get to know each other, and I've got to find out all about how you think, and you'll find out what kind of a person I am so we can deal together. And Bhutto told him, “All you have to do is see what Steve Palmer wrote.” He said, “I told him everything, I'm not going to go through all that again.” And they had a hell of a time trying to find it. They asked me, I was in Madras at the time, how I had reported it, and I told them. They finally found a copy in INR that someone had squirreled away.

Q: It's sort of remarkable about this pussy-footing around. An embassy should not be what amounts to captive of the internal policies of another country, and yet it seems that by having to steer clear of Bhutto even in our internal communications it seems like we were being a bit precious.

PALMER: Let's remember the embassy was not headed by a professional. I think there was a clientism that existed back in the pertinent part of the Department. And on the other side of the coin, there was the Indian partisan side. I think the dichotomy and outlook was stronger there, more apparent there, than it was in the Arab-Israel at that time. So, again, one reached out. The embassy in New Delhi had an extremely able political officer, and very well versed in the subcontinent, in the person of Harmon Kirby, and he and I became friends and colleagues, and visited each other and sorted out a lot of things that needed to be sorted out. But it was a shock to a lot of people that Bhutto won an election pretty much fair and square.

Q: While you were the political officer, were you all on top of this?

PALMER: He was not elected until after I left, and after the war. The war and the essential failure of the Pakistanis in the war was one of the factors which led to loss of public faith.

Q: This is the war over Bangladesh.

PALMER: Yes, the Indian attack on Bangladesh. No, when I left Pakistan in the last period I was there, the military leader of the country was Yahya Khan, Ayub Khan having died. In Pakistan we got to know two very gifted sisters, daughters of a previous supreme court chief justice of East Pakistan. One of them was married to a key person in the Foreign Affairs Secretariat who happened to be one of my most frequent contacts. The other and her police official husband were transferred to Islamabad. It was well known but never publicized, if I may make that distinction, that the latter sister was close to Yahya Khan. They, being Bangladeshi, were aware of things that we were not aware of — some sort of a crackdown could occur in East Pakistan. And, of course, the Indians were aware too, as it turned out.

Q: Did you note any difference when the Republicans took over. You were there '68 to '71, and the Republicans took over in '69. Sometimes there's a saying that the Republicans

seemed to like the Pakistanis more, maybe because its more militaristic or something, and the Democrats seem to have more of a feel for the Indians. But I was wondering whether you noticed any shift in attitude or not when you were there. Joseph Farland came in as ambassador, again another non-career man.

PALMER: Yes, he was a very congenial and fair minded person. No, I don't recall. What you say has been generally true but I don't recall at that time any marked difference. Your mentioning of Joe Farland reminds me that during my last of the three years in Islamabad there was a horrible tidal wave and typhoon in East Pakistan which was the worst in modern history and tens of thousands of people were killed, many were starving, etc. We had a tremendous international relief effort undertaken, and Joe Farland played an outstanding role, and he was over in East Pakistan quite a bit. And I was in charge on behalf of the embassy—I've forgotten what we called it—an international group in Islamabad. We were trying to solicit through the embassies more help, and also the international organizations which used us as their focal point vis-a-vis the horrors of this tremendous national catastrophe. I think the relief effort was really a great and inspiring endeavor.

Q: You left there in '71. You went to Madras.

PALMER: Yes. For some reason Ken Keating, who was ambassador in New Delhi at the time — we had met, though I hardly knew him — but he knew I too was from upstate New York and for some reason he wanted me to fill this slot which had been empty a while. And I agreed because I had sort of fallen in love with the subcontinent. Of course, with three offspring to educate, it was natural to be willing to have another overseas tour. As it happened my direct transfer to Madras was delayed because of the war which was going on at the time.

Q: You were in Islamabad during the '71 war?

PALMER: It started then.

Q: How did we see this thing coming out at that time?

PALMER: We clearly saw the division of Pakistan which probably would have occurred with a different kind of bloodshed had India not been the instigator, because the anti-West Pakistan sentiment was so strong throughout the society of East Pakistan. So nobody ever dreamed of putting Pakistan back together. And concurrently with that realization, or part of it I guess, the West Pakistanis had rounded up all the officials from East Pakistan, including those in the foreign office, and put them in a virtual concentration camp up near Peshawar. They included this wonderful Pakistan diplomatic friend of mine, whose name is Tabarak Husain, who later became Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh and Ambassador to the United States. He was up in this camp, and the families of those officials were given no allowances or anything. Some of them were quite hard up. I remember officers of our embassy, notably Sid Sober who was then DCM, and to some extent my wife and I, taking food to the wives and children of some of these people. We were disturbed that the authorities were so callous about the situation. It was a fundamental cleavage which had been brewing for a long time.

Q: What was your impression during that time of the reporting of the outlook of our embassy in New Delhi?

PALMER: My recollection of it was that it was honest and fair, and they acknowledged that the Indians had utilized some stooges from East Pakistan. In fact, the bottom line for India was a weaker Pakistan, so that's what they were after, and that's what they got.

Q: Then you served in Madras from '71 to '73. Can you do a little compare and contrast what you noted up in the Pakistan capital. Here you were in a southern Indian major city. The attitudes of the people?

PALMER: First of all one has to differentiate between the north Indian establishment which pretty much was reflected in their diplomats and their diplomacy, and the South Indians who were not as, if you will, nearly as nationalistic. Madras was an eye opener for me by virtue of its ethnic diversity and the innate friendliness of the people towards the United States. They were friendly towards everybody, they're a friendly people. And especially in the case of Madrasi and people from Kerala, striving for a high degree of education, competence in the arts, as well as in science. So it was a relatively, given my previous career, a quiet two years, a very different two years. My major responsibilities were public speaking and going all around south India calling on party leaders, prime ministers, chief secretaries, and cabinet officials of the four states in South India. A lot of time on the road. Very quiet, we never received any flash messages there. There were a lot of interesting things. It was a period of concentration on commercial expansion of the United States' concerns; there was quite a lot of emphasis on that and with some success.

I worked very closely with our able USIS people, who ran a successful press placement program, a thriving library, etc. We had just arrived in Madras—having driven there from Islamabad via Delhi in our Volkswagen beetle—when I was called up to greet Mahalia Jackson at the airport. The temperature and the humidity both were 100, and, tired from the trip, I half-fainted on the air strip. She gave a marvelous rendition of Christian gospel songs to a puzzled but appreciative Hindu audience.

There was interest, of course, in the Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka, some of whom we learned later were supported by the Indian government, the national government. My sources, including really close friends like the chief secretary of Tamil Nadu, were open about everything but that. If they knew, which is problematic, but that was really hard to get to. In any case, it wasn't as vividly a dangerous situation as it later became in Sri Lanka.

On the commercial promotion side, I well remember I was in Kerala calling on a whole bunch of ministers because there had been a cabinet reshuffle after a state election, including the Minister of Commerce who was one of the communist ministers. He was

very friendly and we had a good general talk. I got some biographic information that we lacked on him. Then, he said, “Palmer, I want your help.” I said, “What can we do?” “I want a razor blade factory, but I want American razor blade factory, I don't want any Russian, they're no good. We've got to have American razor blade factory.” I put him in touch with Joe Gillette. I don't think they came to a deal, but what was significant was that this communist minister was reaching out for American investments.

Q: Kerala all that time was our concern because it had a communist government.

PALMER: Yes. Sometimes the chief minister was a communist, and sometimes he wasn't. There was a great deal of flux in their shifting among the various factions. There were at least two significant communist factions, one of which was deemed to be pro-Soviet, and the other was deemed to be pro-Chinese. At least we in the post in Madras, and New Delhi also, never regarded the Kerala communists as any seriously inimical to our interests.

Q: Were you there when, or maybe you were just coming, when there was the famous tilt towards Pakistan of sending the aircraft Enterprise into the Gulf of Bengal?

PALMER: It was not long after I arrived, and that was the occasion of the first, and only, demonstration against the consulate during my two years there. We were warned by I guess the chief secretary, or maybe the senior police official, probably the latter, that there would be a demonstration and that he would ensure proper protection. So we buttoned up the place—it was during working hours—and we didn't send people home, but we asked the public to leave the USIA library which was part of the same building complex. This demonstration approached, we could hear some shouting and I was looking down from a second story window. It was a straggly bunch, there may have been 15 people, they had a placard or two, and they were shouting about American imperialism. One of them came up to the steps and the embassy admin officer said, “If they want to talk we should receive them.” And they wanted to talk. I didn't go down but the political officer went down,

and they had a little friendly debate and the demonstrators wandered off. That was the big demonstration, in contrast to the sort of thing that happens in Delhi.

Q: What was your impression of our embassy in Delhi, and what they wanted out of you? Keating, was he the ambassador?

PALMER: He was, but then he was replaced not too long after I arrived by Moynihan. He was a very colorful chief of mission. He visited us in Madras, had quite substantive visits, stayed with us a couple of days and a couple of nights. He and I were mutual admirers, you might say, and we got along well. The embassy gave all of its consuls general a great deal of autonomy. I think for one thing, the distance was so great. And another thing as far as Madras was concerned, unless there were important state elections coming up, or a navy visit, or something like that, it was off the radar screen pretty much. The embassy was always very supportive. Galen Stone was the DCM, and he was very supportive and helpful. So we had a great relationship. Again, I visited the other CGs, and my Calcutta colleague visited me, so we could all appreciate each other's problems a little better.

A footnote on Madras. Service in South India was not without health risks. I was afflicted by something which gave me considerable pain and discomfort in my right torso. Our local consulting physician diagnosed it as a muscle spasm. But while I was on a short field trip in Andhra Pradesh, I began to feel really rotten. My driver perceived that I was quite ill and took me to a hospital in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, which had been established by missionaries. There a bright doctor from Kerala diagnosed it as schistosomiasis, which had eaten away some of my insides. He prescribed the right drugs. While I was recovering at home in Madras, our temporary secretary—the wife of the admin officer—brought out classified materials. Much later, she told me that she found me to be very cranky. Years later, however, after unrelated divorces, she consented to marry me.

Q: Then you left there in '73 and went to Harvard for a year.

PALMER: Yes. I had applied for the Senior Seminar, and the Department came back with option to take this fellowship, a faculty fellowship at the Center for International Affairs which at that time had one State officer each year. Moynihan was very, very strong on this. I didn't really know much of anything about the faculty fellowship. He was very strong, he knew about the program, and he encouraged me to go, and wrote a fine recommendation. So there I was, we were plunked down in Cambridge with access to all classes and seminars, etc., at MIT as well as Harvard. The only charge being that during the course of an academic year, as it turned out I stayed a full year, we had to produce some sort of a short paper on anything we wanted, preferably on some subject that we hadn't dealt with, or an area we had not dealt with, something new to us. It was rather a heady intellectual atmosphere with people like John Galbraith and Stanley Hoffman. I was particularly impressed by some people at MIT like Linc Bloomfield and Lucien Pye, participated in several faculty seminars. I gravitated towards a study of aspects of immigration policy, particularly foreign students and the brain drain phenomenon, and illegal aliens of all kinds. I became heavily immersed in this project, and it took up too much of my time, and the paper turned out not to be a short paper, almost 200 pages as I recall. However, there was a slight benefit to that, in addition to all the things I learned that were new to me, and that was that the paper found its way to the Congressional staffers who were working on a revision of the immigration policy and they found it useful. And it gave me a nice academic breather from bureaucracy.

Q: Then they took you off to doing regional affairs in NEA, '73 to '77. That was a pretty active period.

PALMER: Yes, it was. I frankly was not a little bit disappointed to be called only as an office director at that point in my career. Roy Atherton, who was Assistant Secretary, persuaded me to take the job partly on the basis that it was going to be a very heavy responsibility, and that I would be a member of his front office team, that is when he met with his DASs I would be there too. And it was a very heavy period, and the responsibilities

obviously were variegated. It was a time of tremendous commercial promotion in the Middle East, and everybody was pushing trade missions. Our economic officers were very much in the middle of that, and we had concurrently with all the oil money, military sales, and the question of how much and what kind of equipment we really wanted to put into those potentially volatile areas. And then some other less vibrant issues such as whether to continue the reduced CENTO, the Central Treaty Organization. We were left only with the Brits, the Turks and the Pakistanis in that organization, and the Brits didn't want anything more to do with it. One of the things we had to do was to decide how to put the cap on that without letting the Turks and the Pakistanis feel that we were withdrawing from military commitment. It was certainly interesting. I went to CENTO meetings in Islamabad and also one in Tabriz. We had one also in Washington. The Tabriz meeting of the CENTO Economic Committee was not long before the Shah was overthrown, and that was interesting mainly because of what we could see of the turmoil in Iran, with which turmoil we were not really aware in Washington. That had nothing to do with CENTO per se.

Given all that was at stake in the area, and in light of the British military withdrawal from the Gulf—the decision was several years before, but it was being carried out gradually—there was much fear of the so-called vacuum in the Gulf. So the White House National Security staff in the person of Bob Oakley.

Q: Robert Oakley.

PALMER: Robert Oakley with whom I'd worked with in UNP years before, and I'd known him when he was in Beirut. I was the chairman of the NSC Inter-Departmental Committee for the Near East and South Asia simply by virtue of my position. So he asked me to lead an inter-agency policy focus, and come up with recommendations on what we should do in the Persian Gulf area. This was my major task in those whole four years. I found that, as one does, you can't write by committee. We had a lot of meetings, but the actual writing was done by two of us, the other one being the very gifted, and literate Army colonel who

was the military advisor in NEA/RA. All regional affairs officers have a loanee from the Pentagon. This man was Richard Hobbs. We had meetings and our policy paper was improved. It was one of those times when one almost lived in the Department for a couple of months. We polished it off, and it was approved at the high level by our superiors and it went off to Oakley. He approved it, and it went into effect, the President signed whatever he signed in those days. That policy essentially rested on a proposition that there were two pillars in the Gulf, one was the Saudi Arabia establishment, and the other was the Iranian establishment, and we had to be very supportive of both, and strengthen both, and we also had to be concerned about some of the smaller states, and be sure they didn't feel left out and were not picked upon by the big boys, and we should look for, on a contingency basis, landing rights in case we ever had to put troops down, etc. I remember spending probably an inordinate time trying to find out more than we could readily about the little island of Masirah off Oman. It's a very small island, and I think there was a shed and a couple fishing families.

Albeit that the Shah was overthrown, the other elements of the policy, including the military build-up of Saudis, and the attention to the smaller states, politically and militarily as well, continues on, and that we would intervene if a hostile power threatened oil, and we did.

Q: We're talking about the Iraq war of '90-'91. Was that pretty well what you did during this period, put together this Gulf defensive thing, and the dissolution of CENTO?

PALMER: And the commercial promotion. There were other activities too. This was a time when human rights reporting was just getting underway in a fairly serious manner. I became interested in that, I just had a gut instinct that that was something important particularly in work in the NEA posts. So I took it seriously, and I helped get NEA, if you will, aboard on doing some serious albeit preliminary, but serious appraisals for the first round of reports that year. I had a labor officer who sometimes was not fully employed. It was mostly POL/MIL stuff and economic at the time.

Q: The human rights reports that were just getting started, almost every year the major drafting thing was how to get one that will be considered faithful to the situation, yet not be too critical of Israel. Was that a problem the first time around?

PALMER: That has been a problem from time to time over the years, and there have been some titanic struggles sometimes in the White House, or at least in the NSC, about the Israel report. Also, there had been some tough ones on other countries, the UK and Northern Ireland, for instance, and occasionally the Philippines or Pakistan. But the Israel and Occupied Territories is one, and the South African one previously, were always considered the toughest. Well, we're jumping ahead, but in recent years the Israel and Occupied Territories one has become routinely objective.

Q: How about this first time around?

PALMER: The first time around it was kind of a mishmash. There were some good reports, there were some extremely biased reports. There wasn't any bureaucratic mechanism to review all of the reports. They were kind of all submitted by the desks, then there was a person appointed at director level in the then Refugee Office who was bureaucratically kind of naked who was supposed to pull these together.

Q: This was a requirement by Congress.

PALMER: But the Secretary, Kissinger, thought it was a bum idea, and that word got around so people who were against affecting their clients felt they had a license to present biased, incomplete reports. So the first ones were real mishmashes. Anyway, at the end of four years there I was proposed by NEA, and was the only candidate for a modest chief of mission assignment. They thought it was just in the bag because it was not a highly sought after post, and I was their only candidate and there wasn't any political person after it. But the bright young men who made the decisions on behalf of the Secretary, quite young staff assistants, etc., decided that I was too senior for that job. They selected someone else,

and I was just cast adrift after that because NEA had pinned everything on getting this post for me. I had a period of, not hall walking, but temporary assignments like serving as chair of the senior Foreign Service secretarial promotion board, and serving with Genta Hawkins on the combined federal building campaign. She was also between jobs. Also, a kind of inspections; when a State officer goes to visit FSOs assigned around the country on the Pearson program, I did that. That was fascinating, I had some real fun times doing that, to San Juan, Maxwell Field, and University of New Hampshire, places like that, and the USIA here.

In the meantime HA had been established by law.

Q: That's Human Rights Bureau.

PALMER: The Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Bureau had been established by law, and the Congress required independent objective of all reports every year. And there were a lot of human rights provisions put in foreign assistance, economic as well as military assistance programs. So HA was just being formed under the aegis of Assistant Secretary Pat Derian. She remembered my, I wouldn't say pro-human rights, my open mindedness about objectivity when I was in NEA and she found out I was jobless. She asked me if I would lead a team to organize and review all the human rights reports for the next year, which is the first year that they would be done at least semi-professionally, and according to one standard. And my team—the teams are much bigger now—but, of course, the demands are much bigger now—my team consisted of one man, Doug Cochran whom I mentioned earlier, and whom I had known when he was in Karachi; and a Department secretary, and a college intern. That was the team, and we turned out the reports of '79, and they were very well received in the Congress. Individual criticisms came that this or that was biased, but as a whole they realized that we tried to be objective. But we had titanic bureaucratic struggles with some of the bureaus, and I'd have some DASs and sometimes Assistant Secretaries suggest that I consider the implications for

my career of taking positions critical of country A, B, or C. That reminds me, another often very controversial one was China.

Q: What I'd like to do is stop at this point because we'll move into the human rights field on the next go-around. So, to begin with we're starting at the '77-'78 period when you were starting with human rights. I'd like your impressions of what were some of the problems at that time on particular countries.

PALMER: And what were the problems within the Department.

Q: And the problems within the Department, and also Pat Derian, that whole group. Okay, we'll stop then.

Q: This is July 13th, 1995. Okay, Steve, you heard what I mentioned the last time. You left Regional Affairs for NEA in '77, and you went over to the Bureau of Human Rights. This was a brand new bureau, and you might say the diplomatic establishment were looking at this with some annoyance, or something like that. Can you talk about how you got the assignment, how you felt about it, what you were getting from some of your Foreign Service colleagues, etc.

PALMER: Yes. To review, when I was still in Regional Affairs in NEA the human rights effort was just beginning. At that time there was no bureau, and there was very little legislation relating to the subject. The Department undertook to produce human rights reports on members of the United Nations, or rather only for U.S. aid participants, I think the latter. There was a director of the operation that became refugee affairs. And because I had been cooperative as a regional representative in that initial, and very imperfect, production of human rights reports to which Secretary Kissinger was openly adverse, I caught the eye of Derian and her deputy, Mark Schneider, and was asked to direct the next January reports and to be as objective as possible, and to start to institutionalize the

process. I was assisted by a very able officer, Doug Cochran, and a very able college intern, and that was my team, and a secretary.

Q: Could we talk a bit about the atmosphere. In the first place, what had you heard about Pat Derian, and where did Mark Schneider come from?

PALMER: I had met Pat Derian in the course of my partial responsibilities in NEA/RA, and I found her a forthright person, and a very sincere person about her responsibilities, and very new in terms of coping with anything like the Department of State. It was not exactly oil and water but she had a lot to learn, and the Department had a lot to learn. Schneider was a kind of a bridge. He had less of an emotional approach. He'd come from Senator Kennedy's staff, and he, Mark, was quite instrumental behind the scenes with some of the legislation which stipulated human rights objective vis-a-vis countries which received economic and particularly military assistance. So he had that background. He'd been in the Peace Corps in Central America. I don't know whether it was Guatemala or Salvador, but one of those touchy situations, and was very knowledgeable about Central America where he concentrated a lot of his attention.

So I had the mandate from them, of Derian and Schneider too, to render the reports very objective, and they wanted to contest any serious efforts to undermine objectivity. It was a mixed bag of products we received from the posts. It was darn hard work. I remember spending almost every weekend, including Christmas Day, on the reports that year.

Q: How does the report develop? Where did you stand in the pipeline of the reports.

PALMER: Well, we received a draft from the country desks, who received the original draft from the embassy. Given the newness of this operation, there was a wild variety in terms of objectivity and quality. Some were quite honest, quite straightforward. Others were afflicted with clientitis to the extreme. The desks very rarely did any substantial massaging of the drafts which came in from the posts. So our job was to raise questions about absences of what we considered vital information, about positive spins on negative

situations, etc. And it was a very active process in which Mark Schneider played a very helpful role whenever we asked him.

Q: You must have had the equivalent to a watch list, or something like this of countries. I mean, England wasn't going to be a big problem.

PALMER: Except for Northern Ireland.

Q: Had by this time a dossier been built up on countries other than what maybe the desk supplied so you could say, Ha, when country A comes up, when Patagonia comes up, we know from newspaper reports that Patagonia has got a prison problem, or something like that.

PALMER: A good question. The staff of what by this time had become HA, was building up regional expertise capabilities. It didn't have what they have now, an officer for each continent, or more, but they had people who were looking at the world from HA's perspective. But the databases were quite limited because it was just the beginning, and quite sketchy. We relied more than is the case now on non-governmental organizations to alert us to possible problems. It wasn't that we bought everything that Amnesty International claimed, but if they said there was a serious problem of political violence against political prisoners in X Africa country, we'd look into it. Anyway, there was a great deal of massaging to be done to the reports, and the negotiating process was sometimes rocky and escalated up to levels which were sort of silly. Because she was the new gal on the block, Derian was in effect challenging conventional bilateral relationship ways of doing things. The upshot was there were a few country reports which escalated all the way up to the Secretary, and basically the same ones which tend to escalate even now. China is one, Turkey is another, Iran at that time was certainly one before the Shah. Israel and the Occupied Territories, that probably takes the prize in terms of controversy, sometimes going to the White House.

Q: South Africa?

PALMER: Yes, South Africa too. Korea, the Philippines, and then in Latin America it was spotty, but there were always controversy ones, Argentina at that time. So those were the main ones. We were gratified that when the work was finally sent to the Hill, the reaction was very favorable. Not that the human rights advocates on the Hill said that they were perfect, but that obviously a serious attempt had been made to make them objective and adhere to one standard for all. I remember that was brought out in several hearings in which I testified.

So, that was just a one shot limited operation and my part in it.

Q: While we're talking on this, obviously always Israel but Turkey or Korea, places where we have very definite security interests, particularly in those days, get boosted up to the Secretary's level. How did that work out? What happened? I find it hard to think of the Secretary sitting there and mulling over the phraseology, or saying this is my determination.

PALMER: What happened was that Pat had direct access to the Deputy Secretary.

Q: Who was Christopher.

PALMER: And who was a very strong advocate and bureaucratic backer of this whole thing. That made a critical difference in the whole operation. And as the policy evolved and this legislation began to in effect take hold in day-to-day bilateral relations, particularly the assistance programs, the functioning of the so-called Christopher Committee was extremely vital. It was a big inter-agency committee, it was formerly called the Deputy's Committee, it was almost a mob scene it was so heavily populated from all over town. And he used it as an educative forum in order to show Defense and Treasury and the other affected agencies know that this was in the legislation and we're going to abide by it, and we're going to set standards, we're not going to fly off the handle. It was a very

level headed approach, and without a doubt it gave on the one hand reassurance to the community, including the traditionalists at State, that this wasn't going to be any wild off the handle thing, but it was going to be a steady approach.

Anyway, to answer your question, Christopher did in fact go over controversial reports. And after he supported HA's view, sometimes with some changes and modifications, several times, the word got around and negotiations generally were able to be concluded at a lower level.

Q: Again, I want people who read this to get a feel for how well she took over. You were operating from an office which obviously had developed clout, and clout in the bureaucracy people know when they're dealing with it. Could you then go and sit down with somebody from the Philippine desk and say, these are our standards. Would it be you'd be sitting down with some of these people and saying, now let's talk about this or that?

PALMER: Yes. The nascent regional officers in HA were very helpful in this regard. In some cases they had much deeper background in certain regions than we did. There were a lot of essentially friendly negotiations. There were also cases when desk officers, or country directors, or deputy assistant secretaries in the regions, were in my view, irrational.

Q: We're not talking personalities, but just to get countries. Can you think of any areas where there was particularly controversy, or not?

PALMER: Probably Israel was the toughest usually, at least in those days. But the problem was not so much within the Department, but at the White House, the National Security Council, where all sorts of people got into the act.

Q: On which side?

PALMER: On the pro-Israel side. We can't say this about our friend the Israelis. You can't say that they tortured prisoners, or anything like that. I'm trying to think of less dramatic

examples. Again, it was by example. When we had a pretty honest report about one country, let's say a military ally, we could use that as a measure when we came up against problems with another military ally. Look what people are doing on Korea, this is an honest report, and we've got to be consistent. It was an interesting experience.

Q: Again, back to this particular time, did you see any reflection? I think one of the concerns, if you're in a policy position, particularly in an embassy, it's not just clientitis, it's a practicality. If you do this, one, you of course are fingered as the person reporting this, to the press and everyone, so that doesn't endear you. But the other one is that most governments are corrupt, including our own, and if you were to call out corruption in every telegram that you sent back to Washington, pretty soon you're unable to do business practically. The same would hold true if you say, business as usual but they're still torturing down in the jails.

PALMER: On the first one, corruption does not appear in the statutes as being a factor. And only when it is massive corruption which eats away at the social fabric to such an extent that it does impinge on human rights, as was the case in Italy, and was the case in Thailand, it becomes a factor. But you're right, a lot of the host governments were, of course, extremely anti-pathetic to this whole operation, and what right does the United States to comment about our internal affairs. In fact that was overwhelmingly the initial reaction. Of course we tried to refute that by saying, there's the UN Human Rights Commission, and they look into everything too, and someone has got to start. Of course, the fact that President Carter was interested and a great supporter of human rights was a critical factor, which I should have mentioned earlier. The fact that there were ceremonies at the White House in which Pat Derian appeared carried a lot of weight.

But anyway, in terms of the overseas reactions, quite naturally the embassies staffs were not a little perturbed about the extremely negative reaction of the host governments to the whole idea, much less any public criticism that emerged from the operation. That was where the real rub lay, and in the ensuing years that's all pretty much died down. I think

with the exception of the Chinese. I can comment a little more on these reports when I get into the time when I was senior DAS.

Q: Okay, that's '79 to '81. So we'll come back to that. Then you moved off for a while to Geneva?

PALMER: Yes. NEA had nothing for me after I did those country reports. An ambassadorship had fallen through that NEA had laid on for me. Coincidentally, the job of Chief of the Humanitarian Affairs Section in Geneva had become open due to the illness, and shortly after the death of the incumbent, Derian asked me if I would like to do that. They wanted to upgrade the position to Minister-Counselor rank, and I'd be the third ranking person in the mission. I was delighted to accept, and we went over there in very short order. It turned out I was there a little less than a year but it was a year really packed with a lot of interesting work and developments. The job entailed maintaining high level contacts with the UNHCR, the Refugee Commission, and with the International Committee of the Red Cross, and with — its changed its name twice since then — the organization that helps UNHCR move the refugees.

Q: The National Committee for European Migration.

PALMER: Then, largely my staff which consisted of two officers and a secretary, and about ten Swiss nationals, spent most of its time managing a multi-million dollar program, the European part of the refugee program, and managing in a very real way, that is, making payments to ICEM and various voluntary organizations, and investigating programs. This was centered in the European theater, the movement of Soviet Jews out and into Italy and then to the States and elsewhere. That was the main element of the program, the Soviet Jews at that time. During the time I was there, an international conference on the Southeast Asia refugee problem which was at a critical point with thousands of boat people leaving, and the receiving countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand and others, not wanting to keep them. So there was a high level conference with Vice

President Mondale leading our delegation, and it was successful. The governments pledged an awful lot of money, and there was a useful public focus on that issue.

There was another conference that I attended and I led our delegation; it was an observer delegation, and that was in Tanzania, Arusha, on African refugee problems. Anyway, I was very busy and usefully engaged. I particularly enjoyed and was stimulated by my contacts in the ICRC and the UNHCR senior staff. ICRC was particularly impressive, and I say this because at that time it was not so generally known in Washington, in their program for visiting political prisoners. We gave a modest donation every year to this program, and I related it to my human rights experience, gee; this is important. If they could get into places like China, or places they're not in, what a difference it could make. So we were helpful in enhancing the U.S. donations to that program, which is still going strong, and is still a very useful endeavor. UNHCR, being a UN organization, wasn't the most efficient organization, but had a lot of very dedicated people. I enjoyed very close relations with the commission.

Q: Who was the commissioner?

PALMER: Mr. Poul Hartling, he was a Dane. He had been a Foreign Minister of Denmark. And the key person and my direct contact with the ICRC was John Pierre Hocke, who was the operations director, number two under the president. In both cases the relationships was of honesty and openness and respect for each other's institutional limitations. So I was happily perking along in Geneva, in the meantime we had ambassadorial changes, and DCM changes, and I guess I was acting DCM for two of the months I was there, and I was Charg# for a while. So that was an interesting experience.

Then out of the blue, when I was back on consultations in Washington, Derian asked me to replace Mark Schneider as her senior deputy. I said, “Pat, I appreciate that trust a great deal, but I've only been eleven plus months in Geneva, its been very expensive settling in, it would be a financial disaster to leave at this point. And I just love the work and

I think its important." She said, "Well, I hope you'll reconsider." And the next thing I knew, Christopher wanted to see me, and he put the arm on me and said in effect, "Pat is doing a great job, and Mark has been doing a fine job, and everything is going better than one could have expected, but what we need to do is professionalize the bureau more, and get it more accepted, get it in the mainstream." I said, "I'll consider it, and I gave him the same demurrals. Then before I left town, I've forgotten whether it was Derian or Schneider or Christopher, told me, "Would you like to be invited by the Secretary himself to come back from Geneva to take this job?" And I said, "I'll come." So I pulled up stakes very abruptly in Geneva and came back. It was a rocky experience.

First of all, I'd been back a few days when I was catapulted off to Bucharest for the first annual round table on human rights with the Romanians.

Q: This was obviously way before - this was high Ceausescu.

PALMER: And there was a lot of dancing around the edges. We had a marvelous person from the private sector, Orville Schell the lawyer, and he was very outspoken. Rudy Aggrey was our ambassador, and he was very helpful and we did what we could to support U.S. human rights objectives.

Q: While we're talking about this, can you explain how you saw Romania? This was an international conference.

PALMER: No, this was bilateral.

Q: When you went out there, you'd been dealing with these reports. Romania was an odd thing being a thorn in the side of the Soviets and we kind of liked this, but it had this regime of Ceausescu which certainly later became odorous.

PALMER: It was bad then, and Romanians, particularly those in the Foreign Ministry, who had democratic instincts, were always in a precarious professional position, being let go

or worse. No, I must say it was kind of a weird affair because we said our pieces, and they said their pieces, and there wasn't much joining of the issues. Both sides agreed it had been a useful exchange, and its still, I think, done annually. It was something that Mark Schneider had engineered before he left.

Q: Where did Mark Schneider go.

PALMER: He went to the Pan American Health Organization, an organization across the street from the State Department. Anyway, during the year that I had been away, certain people in HA had gotten on their high horse, and were becoming really quite strident. These were political appointees from outside, mostly from non-governmental organizations. I think while Mark was there, given his political background, a liberal image as a Kennedy staffer, etc., he was able to keep the bureau somewhat in line with the realities of the Department. I found it difficult to do that. I won't go into personalities but some of my mates in the bureau, who'd been promoted while I was gone, had become, in my view, overly strident. It was a difficult time because we were still trying to professionalize, and in that connection I brought in before my first year was up back in HA, I brought in two very fine Foreign Service officers who really made a big difference in terms of professionalizing the bureau. Both were committed to human rights. One was Peter Sarros, and one was Theresa Tull. In the meantime, through a series of circumstances, I became increasingly perforce focused on political asylum work. This was occasioned by the boat people, the incidence of Haitian boat people, and the Cuban...

Q: The Mariel exodus of many prisoner criminals.

PALMER: Right. And because of the political sensitivity of both of those and the interest on the Hill, and because Pat Derian was not nearly as much interested in asylum as opposed to more traditional human rights, it fell to me to do this, hearings on the Hill and being grilled by people like Congresswoman Chisholm about why we were discriminating against black refugees.

Q: This was Shirley Chisholm from New York who was a black and a powerful figure at that time.

PALMER: I remember being asked by Dante Fascell, from Florida, who was chairman of the Subcommittee on Latin American Affairs I believe at that time, about the screening process for the Cuban refugees. And I told him about how they were screened by professionals. And he said, “I want you to take a personal interest in those cases. I want you to look at every file.” I spent weekends for several months looking at those Cuban files.

Q: What was he after?

PALMER: He was after fairness in terms of the American public as well as the asylum requesters, and not admitting and releasing to freedom in this country hardened criminals. As you know, the place in the asylum process for State institute is to not recommend to the INS whether asylum should be granted, but to comment on the cases, and to lend our country expertise to their consideration.

Q: Before we move on, at that time and other times, there was obvious political sensitivity, but we had people fleeing from Haiti, this was Baby Doc at that time, but a pretty despicable regime, and also coming out of Cuba from the Castro regime. Yet, essentially we were turning back the Haitians and allowing the Cubans to come in. And part of this was there was a very strong political community in Florida originally. But it seemed discriminatory as all hell to anybody looking at it from a distance. The Haitians had not had the economic advantages like the Cubans who would be absorbed in the community. So as a practical thing the Cubans probably would do better than the Haitians. But still if you're going to be fair, and here you were in the organization that was designed to be fair.

PALMER: Those were exactly the considerations adduced by people like Congresswoman Chisholm. We looked at it very carefully obviously into the question of whether Haitians

were discriminated against in any appreciable way in terms of the laws pertaining to asylum. And the unanimous version, not only the embassy's eyes and ears, but people we sent down there to take a look, was that they were not, and that the vast majority of these boat people were economic refugees.

Q: What about the Cubans?

PALMER: In my view, a lot of them were economic refugees too. The fact that Cuba had and has a communist government obviously plays a role in addition to the political factor which you adduced. At that time we were not about to send people back to communist countries. At any rate, by the time the 1980 election occurred my situation, although I remained senior deputy in HA, was an uncomfortable one. I never had anything but friendly relations with Pat Derian, and still regard her very highly, but we did not have a comfortable relationship. Perhaps she didn't regard me as crusading enough.

Q: You mentioned these political appointees who'd gotten overly shrill, was she a manager? Her background would not seem to speak to management. Could she sit on them?

PALMER: I don't think Pat ever would claim to be a manager in the traditional sense. She was more of a participant. She was one who went down to Argentina and had harsh words with the junta, and she would take up individual cases with great passion and often effectiveness. But, anyway, the election came and I found myself in January as the acting assistant secretary.

Q: Okay, so you were acting assistant secretary.

PALMER: Yes. There was a sea change in the bureaucratic acceptance of HA which until that time had not been perfect, but was mounting, when the new administration came in, largely because of statements which Secretary Haig had made concerning human rights. So those who were instinctively, or for reasons of bilateral relations, not unenthusiastic

about human rights policy felt they were armed to oppose it. That set up a whole new wall of antagonism that we had to overcome. The administration's nominee to replace Derian was a gentleman by the name of Ernest Lefever who attracted immediate controversy because of statements he had made and continued to make about putting human rights into a new perspective, of doing a quiet diplomacy instead of these public statements and reports. We, largely Peter Sarros and I, got his confirmation materials and were proceeding to... He assured me that I was in complete charge until after he was confirmed. He did not spend a great deal of time even in the Department, except for going over his confirmation materials.

Q: What was his background?

PALMER: He had founded an institute for public policy, a small institute in Washington. It's still going strong, I wouldn't want to describe it as right-wing. I would describe it as taking a conservative pitch towards various social issues. Much to my surprise and dismay, Lefever told me that he wanted to do away with the annual human rights reports. I said, “Ernie, that's easier said than done. It's a law. I personally don't see that we're going to get Congress to withdraw that obligation from us.” He said, “I've talked with some ambassadors, and they're all opposed to them, they're doing us a lot of harm. I think if we explain it to Congress they will understand.” So we kicked it around inconclusively, and then I said, “Look, how about this? How about your sending” — he hadn't even been confirmed yet, it would go out under my name — “a very restricted cable to all ambassadors, for ambassadors only, and just ask them to give their straight views on the pros and cons of these human rights reports.” He said, “That's a very good idea.” So I drafted up this thing. It was a straightforward request, it wasn't pitched with any particular bias. And the reports that came in from the field generally very quickly, I think all within a week. And it was overwhelmingly in favor of the reports. I was surprised. It was really very moving. I could count on one hand, and I won't finger them, the posts which either said, “Well, on balance I guess...” or in one case, it was, “Yes, let's knock it off.” That was

a career ambassador. But all the rest on balance, “We think it's a good thing, we can use it as a handle.”

Q: I think this is a very good example. I was part of the process. I was just a consul general, but in Korea at the time, and very much over time the realization was, it's kind of meddling in other people's business, but this thing has probably effect and it's more true to American ideals, and gut feelings from Americans, than almost anything we've done. We hate to say it, this is from the professionals, it's effective and you don't mess with it.

PALMER: Yes, well that's exactly it. Anyway, this was a very gratifying response. So Ernie backed off, of course, on that one. He was constitutionally unable to desist from long elaborations of views. As usual, we counseled him, now when they ask you a question, answer yes or no, shortly as possible.

Q: Was he from the academic world?

PALMER: Yes, and at his confirmation hearings he'd go on and on, and bring in things which antagonized certain members, and which weren't necessary at all. I liked Ernie personally, he was very honest. Anyway, the nomination failed. The committee did not report it out, and they decided to avoid a floor fight. And then there was this long hiatus when we didn't have any assistant secretary. The Department in general, well, elements in the Department, certain bureaus, were stonewalling us. There wasn't anything like the Christopher Committee to help bring order into the process at a high level. Judge Clark said — I remember bringing people to see him from the NGOs.

Q: Non-governmental organizations.

PALMER: At each encounter he stated that he grew up in an atmosphere of human rights and he was very favorable to human rights. And he would explain: “On the ranch my mother always had Mexican people in the house, nursemaids, etc., and she was very broad minded about having these people, so I learned to be very tolerant at an early age.”

Anyway, my anchor across from the seventh floor, because HA is on the seventh floor, was Walt Stoessel who was Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and I had known Walt just a little bit, we'd never served together. But he understood my dilemma and he was helpful, in one way, bucking up my morale, saying, “It will pass, hang in there.”

Q: Were you having trouble hanging onto staff? With this change of administration you would have found the professionals saying, boy, this is a dying thing, let's get out of here. And political appointees...

PALMER: Well, they all left. We hung onto a couple of the better ones for as long as we could. My two key people, Tull and Sarros, both stayed on and took the heat with me, for which I'll be forever grateful. In the meantime on the Policy Planning Staff there was a man from the academic world called Fairbanks.

Q: Richard Fairbanks.

PALMER: Yes, very much of an intellect of a conservative stripe. I guess HA was in his bailiwick on the Policy Planning Council, and he got into the whole question of human rights policy, doing work on his own, not talking with other people about it, at least with people in HA, looking at the legislation, looking at what would be politically possible under the Reagan/Haig administration, etc. And he became convinced that the new administration could usefully use human rights in a constructive way, could stay with the country reports, and emphasize more quiet diplomacy. But he didn't think it was a negative thing that should be fought. I learned that he had come to this conclusion, and he persuaded in the first instance Dick Kennedy who was then Under Secretary for Management — he'd come out of nuclear control work. I had known him before, and we'd always gotten along okay. So Fairbanks persuaded him, and Haig was persuaded by Kennedy, and all of a sudden the atmosphere, at least at the top of the State Department, had been changed. Okay, these guys are professionals, let's not get in their way too much, and get the regional bureaus to come along. But there was still an aura of disbelief on the

part of some of the traditional professionals who were not friendly towards our enterprise. And then, finally, as a part of this new approach, the White House nominated Elliott Abrams for the job, and Elliott is a very brilliant man, a very quick study. He had learned from the mistakes of Lefever's fiasco, and we went through again the whole confirmation bit, and he was confirmed easily.

In the meantime we were going through another human rights reports cycle, and this was when I think it was the last gasp of those relatively few professionals who were instinctively adverse to the process. I remember receiving a call from a DAS on one of the regional bureaus who said, “Now, Steve, do you realize what's this is doing for your career, when you take an attitude like this? Do you ever expect to get an ambassadorship?” I said, “It's the law, and we're just trying to uphold the law.” Anyway, when Elliott came in, he brought in his new team and my role was finished in HA.

On balance, it was challenging and satisfying, even given the rough part. I look back on it with pride.

Q: When Abrams came on, did he want to bring a new team on? Did he have a deputy who was a professional?

PALMER: Yes. Traditionally, since Steve Palmer, the senior deputy has been a professional; Gary Matthews served there. In the present instance Nancy Ely-Raphel is not a Foreign Service officer, but she's very much a pro in terms of Department service. Yes, Mel Levitsky was brought in to succeed me, and Fairbanks was brought in as a deputy. And anyway so off I went and Tull stayed and was confirmed as the director and got an ambassadorship out of it in due course.

Then I went to another hiatus after I left HA with no job. Dick Kennedy, whom I got to know better during these various crises, said that he wanted to get an ambassadorship for me and asked me how my French was. And I said, “It used to be pretty good, but I could stand some brush-up.” And he said, “Why don't you go over to FSI and brush it up.” Without an

assignment there was a little bureaucratic resistance to that but he called somebody. So I took a lot of French at FSI, I was pretty good. He had something lined up for me, and I never knew exactly who, he indicated it was the kitchen cabinet in the White House, that tried to block it, and Haig got into the act. I was surprised that he was very supportive of me. He said, “This guy deserves a lot for what he went through, and he's a good man, etc.” But anyway, nothing in the end eventuated in terms of a mission. I couldn't keep on taking French forever and ever, and by chance encountered an old friend from Islamabad days, Dennis Kux, and he asked me what I was doing, and I told him. And he said, look, “I'm engaged in an activity I think you'd be interested in. We need someone like you in crisis management operations.” And I had no idea but I figured if Dennis was interested and enthusiastic about it, it would be something that was worth looking into. So, I ended up my last years in the Foreign Service in this crisis management operations endeavor. And among the responsibilities I had there was to find, and recruit, participants in this program for part-time conferences and exercises, from almost the highest levels of the Department on down. I found it to be a really fascinating endeavor. The networking I had to do on my job was very rewarding, and I got to know scores and scores of interesting people in the Department whom I had never met in the Service, and on an inter-agency basis because there was a lot of inter-agency activities with this. We had another four years of the Reagan administration and nothing else emerged for me, and I ended my career in this management operation.

Q: I know that some of this is quite classified, but on this management operations on crises, had up to this point, had the Department been saying, okay, all of a sudden all hell may break loose in Islamabad, or in Tel Aviv, or in Accra, or something like that, had it made any effort to do more than to just tell people to draft up emergency and evacuation plans?

PALMER: Yes. Under Diplomatic Security there was a program which ran demonstrations in embassies. They used prepared episodes largely. I was told that this was very effective. That was an embassy-by-embassy approach, and as a matter of fact, they had been

to Kuwait just weeks before the takeover of the embassy there. It was very timely. We were a function of, if you will, the cold war and the strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union; more than a single embassy, and that's why, as you can imagine, it acquired and still has, some sensitivity. But after my retirement, in '88 I retired, I was asked to remain on doing essentially what I'd done the previous couple of years, and I did so until the program began to wind down at the end of the cold war. So that's my Foreign Service career in a little more than a nutshell.

Q: Well, this has been great. Steve, looking back on it, what gave you the greatest satisfaction?

PALMER: It's hard to pick out one thing. I think organizing and running our post in Sarajevo was a great thrill for a then young officer. Being in London under David Bruce and working on the various crises there was another high point. Tel Aviv and the whole HA experience on balance, tough as it was. I really didn't have any low points, I mean any assignments in which I was bored.

Q: That's why we're able to have this oral history program. I'm not sure we could have a very good one on the normal run of managers of very successful firms. I thank you very much.

PALMER: Thank you.

End of interview